

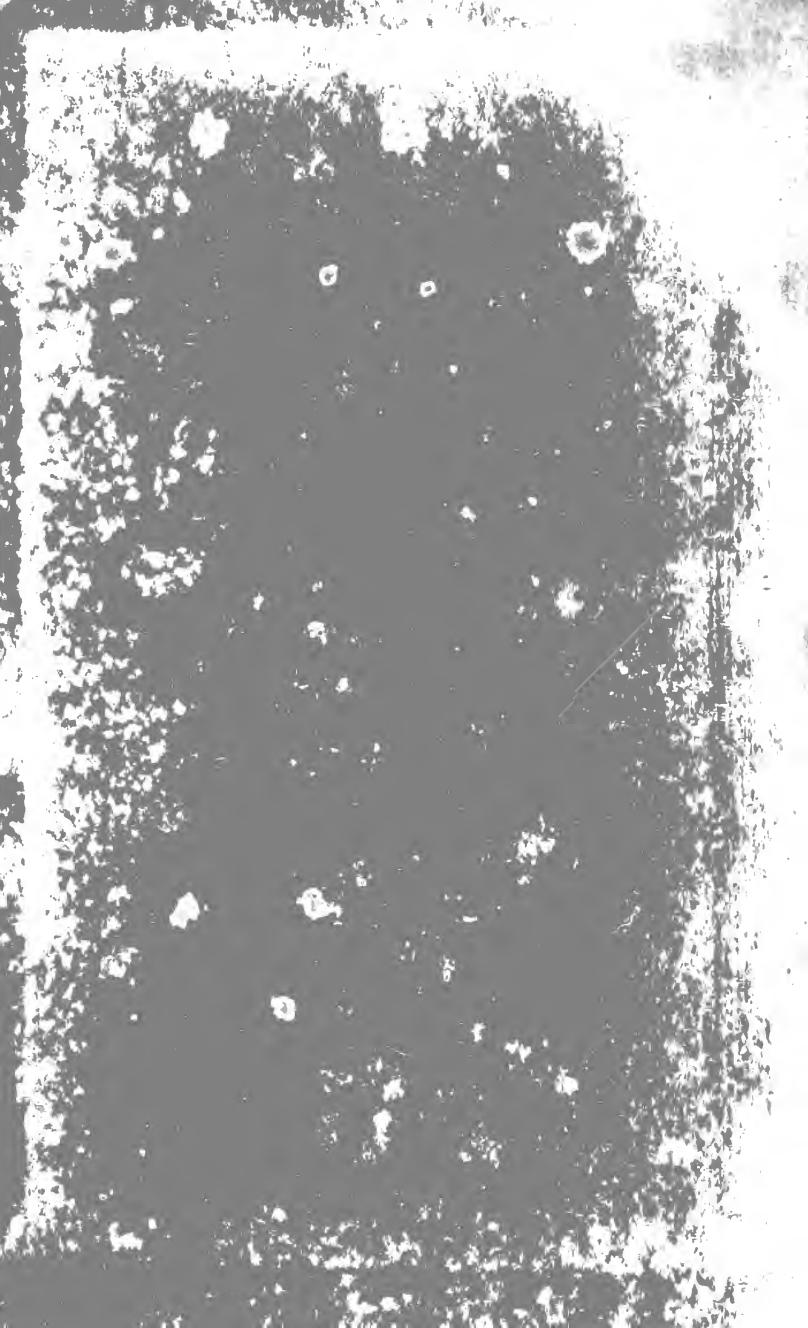




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# THE FOREIGNERS

A Novel

BY

ELEANOR C. PRICE

AUTHORESS OF "A FRENCH HEIRESS," "VALENTINA," ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

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# THE FOREIGNERS.

## CHAPTER I.

### ROYALTY.

**B**OISCARRÉ lay buried in the depths of what was once one of the great forests of western France. Its seigneurs had in old times been masters also of the little walled town of Villemur, then not much better than a robber's nest in the forest. Their dark old tower frowned over its principal street, and the gate, the Porte Boiscarré, which was only approached by an avenue five miles long from the great château in the midst of the woods. In old days this was the only road from the outside world to the

moated fortified stronghold, from which the Counts of Boiscarré and Villemur had held down all the poor wild scattered people of the surrounding country, protected themselves by their great belt of wolf-haunted, almost inaccessible forest, which was only threaded here and there by paths known to their keepers and woodmen.

But all this was in early feudal times, and long before the Revolution great changes had come to Boiscarré and Villemur. The power of the nobles had been sapped by Richelieu, who dismantled the strongest castles all over France, so that their owners could no longer retire to them, and reign there like princes, often in open resistance to the King's authority. So when the eighteenth century began, the seigneur of Boiscarré was thinking more of pleasure and

splendour than of fighting and tyranny. He pulled down a great portion of his castle in the forest, and built a great stone house with wings, with courts and quadrangles, magnificent stone staircases, and halls and galleries, stables, almost as fine as the house, for fifty horses, an orangery, a ballroom, a theatre. He laid out gardens, made bridges over the moat, which was no longer needed for defence, and cut down trees in all directions, making four grand avenues instead of one, so that his château could be approached with equal ease and stateliness from north, south, east and west.

He still, of course, was lord over his neighbours, and the town of Villemur still lay at his feet; but this servitude was less bitter than in the time of his ancestors, and the grandeur and luxury of Boiscarré, put many a louis into the

pockets of the small Villemur tradesmen. There were many abuses, no doubt, and much suffering; but there was now a touch of gilding on the chains, and this man was a generous master, and was remembered as "the good Count" as long as two such words did not, in French minds, flatly contradict each other. He died at Boiscarré, an old man, in the full enjoyment of the splendours he had created.

His sons, his daughters, and most of his grandchildren died at Paris less peacefully, but with quite as much courage and philosophy, in the Place Louis Quinze, at that time called the Place de la République.

One of his granddaughters had married the Marquis de Coigny, and these people saved their lives by emigrating to Germany, where they lived on



nothing, and died in miserable poverty. Madame de Coigny, a melancholy woman, was sometimes heard to wish that she had followed her father and mother long ago up the steps to the guillotine. Her son was more fortunate than his parents. After their death he married a German heiress, who fell in love with him while he was giving her French lessons; and by and by, returning to France, he and his wife made an expedition to see the old château of his mother's family, to which there was no nearer claimant than himself.

The place had been deserted for many years; it was wild, overgrown, and out of repair; only in the stately rooms a colony of poor people had established themselves—peasants whose huts hardly protected them from the weather, waifs from Villemur and other villages. The old family was almost forgotten, even in

Villemur, where the whole population were formerly its vassals. Monsieur de Coigny was disgusted with the dirt, the neglect, the squalor and ruin of the old place, and was ready to leave it to its self-made owners, and never to see it again; but his wife was of a different opinion, being both a prudent and an imaginative woman; and the end of it was that the ragged intruders were got rid of without much trouble, and the De Coignys devoted their lives to restoring Boiscarré to something of its earlier state and beauty. It became once more a Royalist stronghold; for, like most of the good old French families, they never wavered in their political faith; and this occasion on which their son received a Bourbon prince as his guest, was by no means the first of its kind.

Madame de Maulévrier received a letter from Madame de Coigny, begging her to change her mind and join the party at the château. She was assured that the Prince remembered her very well, and hoped to see her again. Long years before he had been at a hunting breakfast with his father at Maulévrier. He was a child then, and M. le Marquis was alive; he was not likely to forget his kindness and that of madame. This pretty message touched Madame de Maulévrier's loyal heart, and she decided to break through her rule and pay this visit, greatly to Mrs. Mowbray's relief, for she and Pauline both looked forward to it with a certain degree of dread.

It was a charming and interesting idea to go back two hundred years, to find themselves once more in the reign of

Louis Quatorze, in an atmosphere of Court ceremony, such as hardly exists now even in Courts. To an historical enthusiast, like Mr. Mowbray, one can understand the attraction of the whole thing; but his wife and daughter, their minds full of troubles of their own, feeling even the Maulévrier life unnatural and longing to get back to England, each for reasons of her own, may be forgiven if they thought they would rather read about the thing than go through it. However, they could not escape; and the stern, kind, straightforward presence of Madame de Maulévrier seemed like a tower of strength and protection to their English shyness.

It was, as she had said, like fairyland, like a chapter of history, or rather of romance. Pauline had never seen such a brilliant house before, so splendid, so

perfectly appointed. She seemed to be in some enchanted palace, as she followed her mother through the great magnificent rooms with their many mirrors, in which it did not occur to her that herself was probably, after all, the most beautiful thing reflected. Monsieur de Coigny made this remark, with a smile and a bow, directly after she arrived; her mother smiled, and Madame de Maulévrier gave a few words of laughing assenting rejoinder. Pauline was seized with a fit of stupid shyness; she hardly heard what they were saying, and for several minutes kept her eyes on the floor. In the nearest mirror, where M. de Coigny had seen and admired her picture, she had just met Gérard's eyes, as he stood in the background, looking, she thought, so noble and so melancholy. For the last day or two he had been careful to avoid her; but

here, just now, he had forgotten the tell-tale ways of a looking-glass, and had allowed himself the pleasure of a moment's gaze. No one but themselves read the little story, but it was enough to fill Pauline at least with new trouble and terror.

She was very quiet and shy with the French ladies, who were quite ready to amuse themselves with her till the Prince's arrival the next day. There was a lively little party assembled to meet him. The De Coignys themselves were most agreeable people. He was tall and simple, with a fair face, something like an Englishman, and looking a great many years younger than his age, which was near sixty. Madame de Coigny was also tall, about forty, with dark frizzed hair, a hooked nose, brilliant eyes and complexion. She was extremely talkative and demonstrative, laughing a great deal and paying extrava-

gant compliments with a kind of dashing ease which made everything she said seem right and natural in its way. Pauline was half fascinated, half frightened by this gay personage, who might very well, with her looks, speeches, and manners, have been a Court lady at Versailles in the old time. She kept close to her mother, fancying that Madame de Coigny might pounce upon her and say something terrible—what, she had not the faintest idea. She was reassured, however, by Madame de Maulévrier's evident liking for their hostess, and by hearing her say that Anne de Coigny was the best creature in the world. This seemed amazing, from such a stiff and proper person as the little Marquise; however, Pauline presently discovered that Madame de Coigny's remarks, startling as they were, were never ill-natured, never really distressing to any

one ; and she soon was almost accustomed to have her cheek touched with Madame de Coigny's fan or the tips of her long fingers, and to hear herself called "Mabelle ange," and to be told that her eyes, hair, and complexion were simply the loveliest ever seen, and so on, till every point of herself and her dress had been petted and praised in its turn. Then, when Madame de Coigny had turned to some other guest, two or three more ladies would come and seat themselves round Mrs. Mowbray and Pauline, and the same thing, with a little less familiar freedom, would begin over again. Mrs. Mowbray, who came in for her share of compliment, was rather amused by it all, and thought Pauline understood it, and was not likely to be spoilt by the experience. The chatter of these funny women had some truth in it, Pauline's mother knew very



well; and such foolish talk was not quite confined to French people either, for Aunt Lucia, dear old goose, being fond enough of compliments herself, had often talked to Pauline about her beauty in a rather extravagant way.

Pauline took it all from everybody in her soft smiling manner; they were very kind to smile at her so pleasantly and say such pretty things; she was amused, as she had been when Mademoiselle de Brye praised her blue eyes and her white skin. Neither she nor her mother had quite the real true Englishwoman's disgust and contempt for humbug of any kind: but then it never struck them that these light laughing compliments could deserve the solidly unworthy name of humbug.

One young married woman, the Comtesse de Loches, a Parisian in the extreme of fashion, and considered a great beauty,

did not trouble herself to speak to the two Englishwomen, bestowing on them glances of curious contempt, as if they were some new variety of savage. Round Madame de Loches the gentlemen gathered in an admiring circle, while she chattered and flirted, and pretended to be terribly bored with them all. Mrs. Mowbray noticed her with some amusement, and remarked afterwards to her husband that however contemptuously men might speak of these painted flirts, they always in fact worshipped them.

“Not all men; and it isn’t exactly worship,” replied George, who had himself—though at a respectful distance—been hanging on the words and glances of Madame de Loches. “Such a woman is a study—a type.”

“A common type,” said Mrs. Mowbray, “thanks to the good taste of men.”

“Not so very common—at least I hope not, for the credit of women.”

The next day the Prince of Catalonia arrived from the station in a carriage and four, accompanied by M. de Coigny, and followed by other carriages with his suite, the whole procession led by M. de Coigny’s “piqueur,” splendidly dressed and mounted. When he came prancing into the court of the château, a chorus of hunting horns struck up the “Royale,” and Madame de Coigny with her guests came forward to welcome the young Prince.

He was a small, pale young man, graceful and dignified enough, with a grave, indifferent air; most of his suite, Spanish nobles with fine figures and dark romantic faces, were more imposing at first than himself. Yet one could not be in the room with him for ten minutes, all

talking familiarly together, without seeing and feeling what he no doubt felt most intensely himself, that if they were noble, he was royal. It made the whole thing more strange and striking to think that here was a prince unacknowledged by governments, unknown to history, a representative of the old Bourbons, a direct descendant of Henri Quatre, and many more kings, yet never, in all human probability, to wear a crown on his head. It was a pageant of bygone etiquettes, a playing at Court, a sight at which the spectators might have smiled, if the pathetic side of it had not struck them more strongly.

Of course the French people, the Prince's entertainers, were not impressed, in either of these ways; they were all brilliantly agreeable. Madame de Coigny treated the Prince with a mixture

of petting and reverence; Madame de Loches murmured softly in his ear, and brought faint smiles to his inanimate face; the men stood round with their hats in their hands, for the Prince only was supposed to be at home at Boiscarré, and kept their voices respectfully low.

If one was to count up all the little peculiarities of old Court etiquette which were observed during those days, the list would be endless, and would only interest a few people like Mr. Mowbray, who noted them with eager care. Mrs. Mowbray thought it all dreadfully tiresome. Pauline went through it as if it was a dream; she was interested to a certain point, and really felt a little enthusiasm for the melancholy Prince, who made her understand Jacobite times, and for the quaint stateliness of the manners and customs. She remained close to her

mother, and nobody spoke to her; she was the only "jeune fille" there, and so quite out of place, and quite uninteresting in that character to men and women alike. Mrs. Mowbray, watching with a little horror the course of one or two violent flirtations, especially that of Madame de Loches with the Prince, understood what Madame de Maulévrier had meant when she talked of the old-fashioned ways of Boiscarré, and of mademoiselle's discretion, and could not help wishing that her innocent child was away. But Pauline was guarded by her own innocence and obscurity, and strangely, too, by the thought of Gérard, who if he did not speak to her spoke little to any other lady, and wandered about like a pale ghost in the background of that bright society.

Two balls; a play acted by amateurs,

in which Madame de Loches took a leading part; a fête in the forest, ending in a dance in a great pavilion in the park, all bordered round with shadowy alleys and sheets of moonlight, were crowded into the first three days of the Prince's visit to Boiscarré. Every one of any note in the province came to these entertainments, many people having come from Paris on purpose to show their respect for the young Prince and the cause of his family. Even officers from the neighbouring towns appeared as M. de Coigny's guests—perhaps a dangerous amusement for them, considering the way that the winds blow in France now-a-days.

No one had such a thorough, honest artistic enjoyment of the whole thing as George Mowbray, who talked a little to the Prince, who thought him odd, and

to the Spaniards, who thawed to him and found him charming, and was laying up a store of materials enough to make him independent of shaky banks in future. Yet so single-minded an artist was he that I verily believe the thought of the West Mercian Bank scarcely occurred to him once during those Boiscarré days.



## CHAPTER II.

“WHENCE ART THOU, GRIMMEST AMONG MEN?”

ON the third afternoon of the Prince's visit, he went out riding with a large party in the forest. Some of the quieter and older people were left behind, and Pauline Mowbray remained with her mother. M. de Coigny, who admired the sweet English girl, wished her to join the riding-party; but even her father, who, of course, was going, did not second him very heartily, and her mother's polite declining seemed quite right and natural to everybody. France certainly is not a paradise for girls.

Pauline, however, had no regrets, and did not feel herself at all illused. She

sat on a shady terrace with her guardians and a few other ladies, surrounded by lapdogs and poodles. It was very hot, but the dry, fresh, sweet-smelling shade of the cedars was a pleasant atmosphere; the ladies sat and gossiped, and stirred the air gently with their large fans. Behind them was the garden-front of the château, with its many windows, the sun sparkling on all its ornamental points of gilded ironwork.

It was like a scene in a picture or a play—unreal, fantastic, and brilliant; the picturesque splendour of the old world, the world of which Talleyrand said, “*Qui n’a pas vécu avant 1789, ne connaît pas la douceur de vivre.*” Servants in bright liveries came hurrying down to the lower terrace, where the ladies were sitting, carrying silver trays of fruit and cakes for the afternoon “*goûter.*”

Pauline had never seen Boiscarré quite so fairy-like, so gay and wonderful, as it was that afternoon with all its human attractions away. She sat quietly enjoying the Watteau-like scene, half forgetting her own private heartaches, sometimes giving gentle and rather dull answers to a fat old lady of very ancient family, who was dividing her attentions between her Maltese dog and the English girl. The dog, on the whole, was the more amusing. The girl seemed distraite; why wasn't she married? What was the use of having a pretty face and sitting here among old dowagers like a statue?

Presently Mrs. Mowbray went away into the house to write letters, and her daughter was getting up to follow her, but Madame de Maulévrier looked round and said, "Stay with us Pauline;" and

she was not sorry to obey. Old Madame de Landry seemed rather pleased, and went on asking the girl funny little questions about her brothers and sisters, showing off *Petit's* tricks meanwhile, and teaching her the right way of throwing him bits of sugar. Some of the other ladies were talking scandal in a low voice. "Take care, mesdames," said Madame de Maulévrier, "the child will hear you;" and then, muttering to herself that such talk was fit neither for man, woman, nor child, she moved away from these ladies, and sat down close to Pauline and the old Vicomtesse.

There was a certain sadness in the girl's face as she spoke of her home in this place and scene, which seemed removed from it by centuries as well as miles. It was a strange mixed feeling,

for Boiscarré was, in its way, enchanting, as Maulévrier had been; and yet life in this country was altogether to Pauline like a magic sleep, painful as well as sweet, exciting, unhealthy to the clear English nature. A fresh breath of the sea, of the pines about her home, Pauline felt would blow all the enchantment away; she half dreaded, half longed, to be at home again. A stranger in a strange land—passing through, and one day finding herself in golden chains—if she had never met Gérard, what a good happy life she might have lived at home! Now, fresh and bracing as it might be, there must always be something wanting; one could never be the same girl again.

"I wish I had never left home! I wish I had never seen him!" thought Pauline, with a sudden revulsion, look-

ing round at the marble-stepped terraces of the enchanted garden. "I wish—I wish I was at Croome, doing the flowers with Aunt Lucia!"

A longing for escape had come over her; she remembered a day when she had walked up a hill at Croome with rain beating against her, carrying a basket for Aunt Lucia to some poor woman, and how there was a joyful excitement in fighting against the wind and rain, and how the Rector had overtaken her and asked in his gruffest tones, "What rubbish have you got there? Is your aunt sending more wine and things to that old humbug?" But, in spite of his indignation, he took the basket, and carried it up the hill to the cottage-door; and the poor dirty old woman heaped blessings on him, for which he did not show the smallest

sign of gratitude. Here at Boiscarré surely it never rained; the sun always shone as placidly as now; that deep sky behind the turrets never knew a cloud, and people never did anything but idle about and amuse themselves. Pauline almost wished for a good rattling thunderstorm. And yet she did Boiscarré injustice; it had had its storms, worse than anything ever known in England, and perhaps some day it will have them again.

But as Pauline sat there and thought of Croome, with an inner haunting knowledge that when she found herself there again all the sunshine of life, such as it was, would have stayed behind in France and be vainly longed for, a very odd thing happened. A servant came from the house bringing a card, followed at a little distance by

a man, at whom Pauline stared vaguely, with a dim suspicion that she was going out of her mind, or else that she would have to believe in ghosts for the rest of her life. He was a square sort of man, dressed in gray clothes, with an English swing in his walk.

The footman came forward, glancing round the circle of ladies.

“For Madame Mowbray,” he said, in a low voice.

“Give it to mademoiselle,” said Madame de Maulévrier; and Pauline took the card which was handed to her.

“Rev. B. Dunstan.” Of course there was no occasion to look at it. She did not feel exactly surprised—it was only another chapter in this uncomfortable romance; but a second glance at the real Ben, advancing solidly along



the terrace with his hat fixed on his head, restored her, in some measure, to her senses, and brought a healthy feeling of startled anxiety.

"Aunt Lucia must be ill!" she exclaimed; and, without waiting to answer Madame de Maulévrier's question, "Who is this, Pauline?" or to notice the amazement of the other ladies, whose dogs also began to bark in chorus at this strange intruder, she left them all, and hurried forward to meet Ben in the sunshine.

He was tired and dusty; the grave worn look in his face was not reassuring, but for a moment there was a happy light in his eyes as she came flying to him from the cedar shadow. He put out both his hands and took hers, with an exclamation,

"I thought I should never find you!"

Then he dropped her hands, and gave her a quick glance from head to foot—so white and dainty, and so much more beautiful than she ever was before.

“A dusty beggar like me—I’m not fit to shake hands with you,” he said.

“O yes, you are. I’m so glad. I was just wishing for somebody from home,” said Pauline, with an eagerness which made him smile, though he was not fool enough to flatter himself that she had wished for *him*. No; her welcome was far too frank and unconscious for that.

“Is your mother there?” he said, looking beyond Pauline at the group under the trees.

All those ladies were spying curiously at him with different expressions of horror.

“What an Englishman! He doesn’t bow; he stands there with his hat on;

he clutches the hands of Mademoiselle Mowbray in a way that never was seen before. What a bear, what a monster! Not a gentleman, of course; but the English so seldom are that. But what can he have to do with that charming girl? This is too extraordinary! Can dear Madame de Maulévrier perhaps explain it?"

No; Madame de Maulévrier was as much startled as anybody else. At first she hardly perceived her duty; but after a minute she got up, and prepared to go to the rescue of her young friend, who meanwhile was talking most confidentially with the barbarian.

"Mamma is in the house; she went to write letters. Papa is out riding with the Prince. But why did you come? Is Aunt Lucia ill, or any of the children?"

“No ; they are all well. I came to see your father and mother on business. Miss Mowbray wanted me to come, and it seemed the best way,” said Ben, quietly.

He looked straight into her face. Could he venture to say any more at present? He was not smiling now, but quite grave and anxious ; the cloud of trouble had only lifted for a moment at sight of her. Must he let it descend, and wrap her, too, in its chilling folds? Had she courage to bear bad news, this delicate lovely creature, who was no longer somehow the simple spirited girl that used to come to Croome? At the first moment Ben had not seen the change ; now at every moment it became more clear to him ; but he could not understand it.

“But what is it?” she said, rather

dreamily. "Why didn't Aunt Lucia write? She *must* be ill."

"No; why should I deceive you?" said Ben. "I came because a messenger seemed best. Not a pleasant task, to disturb you in the middle of all this; with some sort of a Prince, too, to add to the glory of it."

"I know you hate princes, but don't speak evil of them here," said Pauline, smiling. She was thinking what an oddly uncouth creature he was, and yet what a safety and confidence one felt in talking to him.

"Well, but if you are a messenger, what is the message? It must be something very important."

Ben frowned impatiently; this trifling tone chimed in badly with his humour, and yet his face softened again directly. How could he feel anything but pity for her now?

"Suppose we go and find your mother," he said. And he took her hand very gently in his again, forgetting all spectators, and looking into her blue eyes, where a troubled consciousness of some great danger was slowly dawning.

At this crisis Madame de Maulévrier walked up to them.

"My dear Pauline," she said, "will you make me acquainted with this gentleman?"

Pauline turned round, blushing, while Ben dropped her hand in a terror that was quite new to him, and made him twice as bold the next moment. The Marquise had an air of stately disapproval, which did not vanish when Pauline said,

"It is Mr. Dunstan, madame—a friend of ours. He has come to see my father on business."

"Ah, Madame Mowbray was saying something about business," said the Marquise, making Ben an overwhelming curtsey; in spite of which he only just lifted his hat, and put it on again. "I hope it is nothing, monsieur, which will hurry my friends back to England."

"I fancy they will think it is as well to go home," said Ben, with his sturdiest air.

"Well, Madame Mowbray will decide that. Shall we send to tell her you are here?"

"No, thank you," said Ben; "Miss Mowbray will take me to her; won't you?"

"Allons," said Madame de Maulévrier. "Come, my child." And she walked away with them along the terrace.

Ben thought it all horrid formality;

he was quite incapable of understanding Madame de Maulévrier or her motives. He did not know that she guessed the nature of his news; that she feared a shock for Pauline, whom she really loved, if this rude man was allowed to break things to her as he chose; and also that she could not have allowed such a crime against etiquette, in the eyes, too, of all those gossiping women, as the walking away together of these two young people, English barbarians as they might be. Pauline went with her silently; no one knew the thrill of pleasure and pain with which she heard Gérard's mother call her "my child." Madame de Maulévrier did not speak again to Pauline, as they went towards the house, but addressed a few formal remarks to Ben, who answered shortly and gruffly: she thought him horrible.



Mrs. Mowbray looked up from her writing, to see Ben Dunstan standing at the door; and she got up at once, trembling all over, and turning pale. In another moment Pauline's arms were round her.

"Mother, is it bad news?" said the girl, hiding her face on her shoulder.

"Is it too late? Why didn't they telegraph? Why didn't John—" began Mrs. Mowbray, in a strained eager voice.

"We did telegraph," said Ben, walking forward to the table. "But things were worse than we thought; and, after all, if you had been in England all the time I don't believe anything could have been done. It has been a rascally affair altogether."

Mrs. Mowbray was looking at him with eyes full of terror. She did not ask him to go on; her head was full of

confusing thoughts—her husband, her children, this child who was clinging to her. She knew very well what had happened, and all the consequences; but she stood quite still, holding Pauline closely, and except in that painful look she showed no sign of violent feeling.

Ben had never liked her particularly, but he thought just now she was a brave woman. He was going to speak again, but she silenced him with a sign, and called after Madame de Maulévrier, who was turning away from the door.

“Madame, wait a moment; would you be so good as to let Pauline go with you? We must talk, and she won’t understand. Go, my darling; I don’t want you here now.”

“Viens, mon enfant!” said Madame de Maulévrier, almost tenderly; but Pauline did not seem to hear her.

"Let me stay with you, mother," she said.

"Why don't you let her stay?" said Ben. "She has plenty of courage. She had better know all from the beginning. Let her help you; she can't begin too soon."

To Mrs. Mowbray these words sounded little short of brutal. Her Pauline, her sheltered petted darling!—and what an odious hint of the future! But Pauline herself was quite differently impressed, and looked up, meeting Ben's keen eyes gratefully.

"Yes, mother, let me help you," she said.

"Well, my dear, when you want me you will find me in my room," said Madame de Maulévrier; and she went away.

Then came the long, painful, hopeless

talk which Ben had been rehearsing with himself all the way from England. As soon as the bank's affairs were known to be hopeless, he had both written and telegraphed to Mr. Mowbray; letter and telegram had arrived at Maulévrier after they had left for Boiscarré. On the day of the smash he telegraphed again; and then, at Miss Mowbray's wish he started off and travelled hard to bring them all particulars, and to be of use to them on their way home. Not finding them at Maulévrier, he hurried on without rest to Boiscarré; and he was of opinion that French trains and French horses were alike the slowest things ever known.

The West Mercian Bank was gone; the liability of the shareholders, though not actually unlimited, was very great; and it seemed too likely that the Mowbrays would lose almost all they had.

Ben had only done Pauline justice—she had plenty of courage, and plenty of sense too ; and now that this reality had come to wake her from her dreams, it seemed to him that the change he had seen was passing away, and that she was once more the bright girl he had admired. A spoilt child, no doubt, but with a great deal of fine character under the spoiling. Poor Mrs. Mowbray, as she became more and more conscious of the blow that had fallen, lost her self-command for a moment, and leaned over the table hiding her face. Pauline, sitting close beside her, took her hand, and held it between her own, talking to Ben all the time, asking straightforward questions, which were answered with almost unnecessary fulness and plainness ; he saw no use in disguising the facts or softening them down. Whatever chivalry Ben had was of the

thoroughly modern kind; in proportion to his respect for a woman, he thought she could, and must, bear her full share of trouble. This, at least, was his theory, though in what concerned Pauline he had often caught himself falling short of it, a foolish tenderness inclining him to save her, and spare her any extra pain. But there was a fine satisfaction, after all, in meeting her eyes, and telling her the worst; she must know it some day; and this strong-hearted lover even thought, or believed he thought, that a touch of poverty and hardship would not be altogether bad for her.

Mr. Mowbray came in before their talk was done, and then it all began over again. He took the news quietly, refusing to believe, with his usual hopefulness, that things were quite so bad as Ben represented them. What tried him

most was leaving Boiscarré immediately ; but his wife and Ben both insisted on the necessity of this, and the next thing was to take Madame de Maulévrier into their counsels. They had left some of their things at Maulévrier, and, after consulting the Marquise, they decided to go back there that night, and to start for England the next morning.

By this time the riding-party had returned, and the château was again full of its gay visitors ; only, as it happened, Gérard de Maulévrier had gone off to Villemur with one or two of the Prince's Spanish companions, to show them its curiosities, and did not come in till much later than the rest. Madame de Maulévrier was full of sympathising kindness for her English friends in their trouble, and was not deceived by Mr. Mowbray's trying to make light of it. She had a

talk with Madame de Coigny, who was desolated and heart-broken, ordered her carriage, and drove away with her friends through the forest to Maulévrier, two hours after Ben Dunstan had arrived with the news.

Then Pauline, sitting in the carriage and looking back at the vanishing turrets of Boiscarré, remembered how she had sat dreaming on the terrace that afternoon, and had wished for a storm to break into that oppressive luxurious peace. The storm had come, and was whirling her away in the skirts of it, though the calmest and brightest of skies still smiled over Boiscarré. It was well, she thought; for, after all, she did not realise the future, and was not afraid of it, and only imagined herself rather more useful to her mother than she had been before, with dim floating plans of teach-



ing her sisters, and learning to make cakes. It was even well that Gérard had not been there to say good-bye; and she thought that now she would soon forget him, or only think of him as the most interesting figure in a wonderful series of pictures, which, of course, must be remembered, to a certain extent, all one's life long.

### CHAPTER III.

“COULD LOVE PART THUS?”

COMING back to Maulévrier was very like coming home, though they had been only three days away from it, and it was with a strange feeling of peace and familiarity that Pauline lay down that night in her old room once more. She did not sleep much, however, and she got up very early and went out for a last ramble round the place which had such a charm for her; in its silent solemn bareness it seemed far grander than Boiscarré. It was beautiful too in the golden freshness of morning; the birds were singing, and all the rustling leaves welcoming the day. Pauline could not

think without pain of saying good-bye to it for ever.

Her walk in the old precincts was shortened by meeting Ben, who was looking about him with a good deal of interest mixed with contempt. He was unpleasantly cheerful; he had got rid of his burden of bad news, and was satisfied of the courage of its rightful bearers. After his night's rest he was matter-of-fact, and inclined to make the best of things and to sneer at Frenchmen. He began saying to Pauline that it would take a fortune to keep up a rubbishing old place like this—that the whole thing was absurd, and ought to be pulled down—one must come to France to see the real nonsense of old families.

"That palace yesterday was simply offensive," said Ben. "This is not so smart, but just as insolent. When one

thinks about it, the Revolution was not wonderful. It must have done people good to see these places blazing."

Pauline looked at him vaguely; the spell seemed to have fallen on her again; her eyes, which were hollow and almost tearful, suggested that she had forgotten everything but the fact that, in two or three hours, Maulévrier would have become a place that she remembered. After a moment she smiled; for Ben's incongruous remarks did not exactly make her angry.

"O, do you think so?" she said; and, without stopping to talk to him any more, she walked on into the house, leaving him standing in the courtyard. He looked after her, and saw that she did not go upstairs, but crossed the hall to the left, and went in at one of the high carved doorways.

After a moment, he did not quite know why, Ben followed her. The house was of course unknown to him, and he found himself in an anteroom hung with old family pictures, with two curtained doorways at the further end of it. He went through one of these, and made a few steps forward, finding himself in a large library. His eyes went roving over the shelves but he was not thinking of books just then, and the sight of Pauline, in a distant window, would have driven the most curious editions out of the most literary head.

She was standing, half leaning on the back of a large old sofa, in her favourite corner, as we know, and gazing out of the window with a hopeless dreariness that could not possibly be misunderstood. So heavy were her thoughts, so strong was the feeling that this was a last good-bye to

the pleasant haunts of romance, and that life in future—no, Ben saw very well that she was not thinking of the future at all or of his bad news, or of any place or people on earth but Maulévrier and its owner—but so heavy were her thoughts, filling her whole self so entirely, that she heard no footsteps and did not know he was there. With a feeling of shame and remorse at having followed her—for he was not a stupid man, with all his obstinacies—Ben turned away and stole out of the room. He went back into the court, let himself out of the tall gates, and began strolling down through the damp cool shade of the avenue, flecked with arrows of gold light that darted through the trembling lime-leaves. He had not gone many yards when a carriage turned suddenly into the avenue from the village, and came dashing up towards the château.

It was driven by a handsome wild-looking young man, with a pale face and a long moustache. Ben looked up as he passed, and the two men stared full at each other.

Ben was not at all given to recollections, sentimental or other, but he never forgot that first meeting; a sort of cold hopeless shiver ran all over him, and then came a flush of something like furious hatred. Boiscarré and Maulévrier had impressed him with their "insolence," but towards the inhabitants, so far, he had felt nothing but amused superiority, and it had not occurred to him that the Marquis, who had certainly troubled his thoughts a little during the past month, was probably very different from them all. He knew at once that this must be the master of Maulévrier, and his spirit rose, with what he would have called manly independence, against this young aristocrat who matched

his house so well. We know Gérard's real gentleness, but Ben did not and never could know it, and he only saw a haughty, frowning face, full of what he called insolence, and longed to punish. No doubt there was some high principal at the bottom of this longing; the possibility that a woman might admire this sort of thing had nothing at all to do with it! Ben was a clever fellow in his way, and very honest: but his own real motives may sometimes have been hid from him.

His self-control was tried immediately by the stopping of the carriage, and the approach of the pale young man, hat in hand, and full of tragic earnestness.

"May I ask, monsieur—you are Mr. Mowbray's friend, I believe?"

"Yes, monsieur," said Ben, grumpily.

Gérard afterwards reflected that he was a cross little fellow, but at that moment



he was not impressed by him personally in any way, and only thought of him as a means of information. Ben would have liked him still less if he had known how completely his scowls were wasted.

"I was out yesterday, most unfortunately," Gérard went on to explain. "I was struck dumb when they told me what had happened—and of course I follow at the earliest moment."

"You need not have troubled yourself—there's no good to be done," said Ben; but the Marquis took no notice of this.

"You brought the news?" he said. "As their friend, pray tell me the truth. I cannot believe that these charming people have lost everything—it seems impossible."

"We won't enter into it now," said Ben, dryly. "Perhaps things may be better than they seem."

Gérard threw up his hands and shrugged his shoulders in a sort of despair. Ben looked at him with a hard grin; he thought this fine gentleman was making quite a funny exhibition of his feelings. Who was likely to feel most, he wondered, this fellow or himself? Yet women might be fools enough to believe in all this nonsensical show, while they close their eyes to the real thing which lay a little deeper.

It never occurred to Gérard that he was being criticised; if he thought at all of the creature who was talking to him, he thought he was some heartless animal of business who made a trade of other people's losses—not really a friend of the Mowbrays, that was impossible.

“I am very early,” he said. “Can you tell me, monsieur, shall I find any one down yet?”

"Nobody but Miss Mowbray," answered Ben. "She has been walking about the garden, and now she is in the library."

"Ah, merci?" said Gérard; and in another moment he and his dog-cart were gone, disappeared behind the iron gates, and Ben was left in the avenue.

He was always doing it—he knew it; cutting his own throat, telling people things to his own disadvantage. He called himself a hundred fools as he walked down towards the village, and then changed his mind, and told himself how absurd it was to be afraid of that French ape of a fellow; but the fact remained that he wished they could have started an hour ago. This place had evidently some strange influence on Pauline; some girls were such romantic idiots. A Frenchman always married for money, Ben believed; and he did not

know why this fellow should be an exception, though of course Pauline might make the most bigoted Frenchman forget his national customs. But if the villain had been flirting with her and meaning nothing, just with the concentrated villany of all his ancestors—Ben clenched his fists, walking resolutely away from the château all the time, and quite forgot that he was a clergyman.

Pauline was still standing by the library window when Gérard came into the room. She turned round and looked at him, trembling, as he walked up to her, and in another instant he was holding her in his arms, he had kissed her, and they had forgotten everything in the world but each other. It was one of those minutes in life when a power greater than all laws must have its way; but it was only a minute; such happiness,

bright and terrible as lightning, is gone almost as soon as it comes. Pauline hardly realised what had happened before she was trying to escape, but Gérard would not let her go so easily.

"My dearest—you know how I love you—don't send me away," he said under his breath.

"Don't say it," sighed poor Pauline; "I know—I know."

As soon as she could think at all, she thought that she had better tell him the truth; not blame him, not be angry with him, but tell him how well she knew that this was wrong—that they must forget each other. And yet how hard it was, how cruel, that such misery must be! She could not speak, but sobbed once or twice, and tried to turn her face away from him. All seemed black darkness, and Gérard's presence the only

light; but the darkness must belong to her.

“Don’t, O don’t; it is very wrong,” she murmured. “You must not. Please go away.”

“What do you know? Tell me what you know,” Gérard asked, softly.

“She told me. I have known it all this time. I have been dreadfully silly; and you *must* go away, and we must never see each other again.”

“Very well,” said Gérard. “Every one would say the same, no doubt. Yes; there is nothing to look forward to but horrible bondage. But you love me, I know you do, and you are my only love; and we may at least have five minutes of happiness. There is plenty of misery for both of us in the future. You love me, Pauline?”

Till Gérard talked like this the poor

girl may have had some tiny spark of hope, some faint idea that he might find some way of escaping from this hated engagement of his; but now the spark went out suddenly. He might dread his future, but it never occurred to him to give it up for her. She felt a little wonder. Surely a man could not be forced to marry against his will. But she did not think or reason about it then, or define in her mind the different kinds of honour; only she knew by instinct that he could not be allowed to make violent love to her, calmly telling her at the same time that he must marry another woman.

"You have no right to ask me; let me go," she said, feeling suddenly proud and strong.

"I know you do," said Gérard.

He was not holding her any more, but

standing before her, looking down into her face with passionate eyes that she hardly dared to meet.

“You are very cruel,” she said, suddenly. “I don’t think it is manly of you. What have I done to make you speak like this? I wish you had not followed us. You might have let us go quietly away. We have lost all our money, and shall have to work. I shall have to work; and you need not have given me all this fresh pain; it was bad enough before.”

“My dearest, listen to me.”

“No, you are not to call me that; it is wicked of you. I mean to forget you directly. I shall. Don’t talk to me any more, you make me miserable. What is the use of it all?”

“If you are miserable, what am I?” said Gérard.



He was a little puzzled by her indignation and sudden coldness. There was almost scorn in her blue eyes, and he could not understand it at all. In his mind, of course, love and marriage were not connected as they were in hers. He would have given worlds to marry Pauline; but as fate and family duty had arranged for him to marry Françoise de Brye, what was there to be said? Pauline also, no doubt, would go home and marry some rich Englishman, to whom her want of "dot" would not signify. The idea cut Gérard like a knife, but it was one of those things that happen every day in this hopeless world.

"I do not think you will forget me so soon," he said. "I shall remember you for ever; and for your sake I might even wish to have been an Englishman.

You say these things, my Pauline, but the truth is that we adore each other." And he caught her suddenly in his arms again. "It is only to say good-bye."

"My son!"

Pauline snatched herself from Gérard, and stood covered with burning blushes, bending over the end of the sofa and clutching it with both hands, while he turned almost fiercely to meet his mother. Madame de Maulévrier stood there, in her old plain gown and her garden hat, her face paler than usual. She did not look at Pauline, but gazed at Gérard with frowning, mystified eyes.

"Mon Dieu? am I dreaming?" she said, after an awful pause. "Are these English manners? I was looking for Mademoiselle Mowbray. Madame her mother is waiting for her."

Pauline felt dizzy. She did not know

how she was to reach the door; but in some way or other she must escape from these two. She began to walk quickly down the room, tremulous, and looking on the floor. As she came near Madame de Maulévrier, she half paused, and then hurried on again, not daring to look up into her face. Neither of them spoke, or made any attempt to stop her. The unhappy girl tottered out of the room, and then, quickening her pace, flew upstairs like a hunted creature. It seemed to her that no shame and degradation could be deeper than this.

"Am I dreaming? Are these English manners?" Madame de Maulévrier's voice was ringing in her ears. Pauline thought she would never cease to hear it; that all her life that awful moment would be as present as it was now.

As for Gérard, he too was terribly

ashamed. His mother's exclamation had brought him suddenly to his senses. He turned away and leaned against the window. The Marquise came up and stood close beside him.

"So I was deceived in that girl," she said, after a silence. "Has this been going on all the time, Gérard? I took her for an angel, with her soft looks."

"She is an angel. The whole thing is my fault; but what is the use of talking!" exclaimed Gérard. "This marriage—I always fought against it from the first; and, since I knew Pauline, my life has been nothing but misery. It is only this instant, finding her sad, I told her I loved her. We were saying good-bye for ever. It was my doing; she would hardly hear me speak. You might have spared us; we shall never see each other again."

"You are a fool," said the Marquise, angrily. "Spared you, indeed! You are mad, my son. You have been behaving all this time like an unworthy, dishonourable man. To this girl, who you say you love, you have behaved even worse than to—the other. She knew nothing of your engagement. I suppose she does not know of it even now; and she goes away expecting you to marry her. Is that the fine position we are in?"

"She knows of my engagement," said Gérard.

"Then she is beyond my understanding, and I beg that I may never hear her name again. She is English—that is the only explanation, for her parents are well-bred people. Poor Madame Mowbray! she has troubles enough, I must say. As to you, Gérard, in heaven's

name let us have no more farewells. You have shocked me terribly, and now you will do as I ask you."

"What?" said Gérard.

He looked the picture of despair as he stood leaning his head against the window-mullion.

"Go to your room, and stay there till these people are gone. They will not be surprised; they do not know you are here, for I imagine that *mademoiselle* will not talk about you just now."

"You need not be afraid—" began Gérard.

"My son, it is enough. I do not mean you to see her again; you are mad, and I shall treat you accordingly. Go; do you hear me?" The little mother stood there and gave her orders with an imperial air; her tall son did not attempt to resist or disobey, but

without another word went away to his room.

The Marquise was right; Mr. and Mrs. Mowbray thought he was still at Boiscarré, and left messages for him with her, hardly noticing, in the hurry of parting, with all their own troubles on their minds, the gravity and stiffness of her manner. Ben wondered what had become of the long-legged hero, but wisely kept his thoughts to himself; he looked at Pauline, keeping close to her mother, perfectly silent, with a veil tied over her face in some strange new care of her complexion, and guessed that some kind of scene had happened in the library. Whatever it had been, Ben thought he need not make himself miserable about it; if such a thing was possible, it seemed that Pauline might have snubbed the Marquis.

So Gérard's English friends left Maulévrier; and he was not there to wish them good-bye; and his mother, who had been so brightened and amused by their visit, stood listening to the rolling wheels that carried them away, and said to herself, with hands devoutly clasped together, "Thank God, they are gone!"



## CHAPTER IV.

### CLEEVE POINT.

ONE evening in August, four young people were sitting together on the top of a cliff, where the grass grew soft and fine, where wild thyme clustered among small ledges of gray rocks, over which the sea-wind blew. The afternoon had been misty and warm; now the sky was covered with fleecy clouds, through which a red glow of light was flushing slowly upwards, for the sun was near setting, and the gray day meant to end in a glory of brilliant colour. "That broad water of the west," on which the misty light was falling, changed gradually from brown and silver to rose,

and lay rippling, "incarnadined," in all the magic beauty, usually hidden from ordinary eyes, for which poets know and love it.

Lower down the cliff, on the landward side, some great Scotch firs were standing silent, for even their musical murmuring would have broken the solemn stillness of that evening. But the western light was piercing under their dark green roof, and their tall trunks were beginning to glow like fiery pillars there in the twilight. Up the steep soft path among their roots, climbing above the old gabled house that lay under their shelter in a dip of the downs, out on the green sheep-walk bare of trees, to the top of the cliff, where it broke suddenly in a steep descent to the beach, Ralph and Philip and Kitty Mowbray had carried their

sister Pauline in a chair, that she might breathe the fresh sea air, and see the sunset from their watch-tower once again.

They had brought rugs and cushions, and she was comfortably settled, with her face to the west, and with a ledge of rock behind her. The three sat round in front of her, and they had now been there nearly an hour, talking over all kinds of old recollections. Their first fairy tales had been legends of the west; in their games they had always been Druids or King Arthur's knights, who, by some curious arrangement of history, were defending Cleeve Point against the Saracens. The enemy's ships had to be watched for by some bold advanced guard, and signalled to the fir-grove down below, from which various gallant warriors, with swords

and lances, would dash forward to challenge them, and stop their way up the Channel. The only sad part of these games, which were full of romance and imagination, had been that Ralph always would be the leading character, whether it was arch-druid or King Arthur or Lancelot. Philip had no chance at all, though he was only a year younger, and quite capable of standing up for himself.

Pauline lay dreamily back on her cushions, and listened and laughed, and watched the clouds as they melted gradually away in that rising light of evening. The three faces before her were full of earnestness. They were a strange mixture, those three, of romance and common sense, with an endless power of scorn, which was bestowed on all show, all cant, all pretension, all

dulness, all frivolity, even all sentiment, except what belonged to themselves. They were shy, odd creatures; full of observation, silent to everybody but each other. Philip was the pleasantest of them, and the most inclined to like his fellow creatures, though his manner and remarks were rough and arrogant enough. Ralph was dark, quiet, scientific, vain, and satirical, with a deep contempt for all human weaknesses; his sister Kitty, a plain, clever child of fifteen, adored him, and did her best to copy all his faults. She in her turn was copied, though in a weaker fashion, by Carry at thirteen; but Carry was softened by the dependence of her youngest brother George, a gentle, delicate little fellow, who had more of his eldest sister's amiability.

There could be no doubt that Pauline,

both in beauty and sweetness, was the flower of the family. She was very different from them all, having little of their strength and independence of character, and the consequence was that she was their darling. No one ever quarrelled with Pauline, even in childish days: the boys could not resist her soft ways, and she did everything she liked with them. While she had plenty of spirit and courage to make her a delightful playfellow, and was never afraid of mischief, she was always the one to beg off punishment, and help her brothers out of the worst scrapes. Of late years Philip had hinted that she was getting rather slow; but Ralph and Kitty did not agree with him, so he said no more about it.

“Yes, it’s an extraordinary thing,” said Kitty, finishing off a long conversa-

tion on the old games; "these younger ones are made of different stuff from us altogether. Why, we were never ourselves. I'm never myself now—at least very seldom."

"You had better come to yourself, playtime's over," remarked Ralph.

"Don't talk about it. Polly, don't you agree with me? Don't you see how different those children are? They are nothing but Carry and George Mowbray, two dull little creatures as ever lived. When I was their age I was some character in history, or a stranger on a tour through England, or a French girl escaped from the Revolution, or an unknown Princess. Weren't you?"

"Not exactly to amuse myself, I think." said Pauline, dreamily. "When you and the boys made me somebody, I suppose I was."

"Yes, my dear. It's long ago, so you may forget; but I know you were generally Guinevere, because I never thought you were sad and splendid and desperate enough."

Pauline coloured faintly, and laughed.

"Look at the sea," she said.

"Stop your nonsense, Kit," said Philip. "It's all over, so what's the good of talking about it? Let's talk about something else. Tell us about France, Polly, if you're bright enough. We have waited patiently, I'm sure."

"We've come to the conclusion that France is not so jolly after all; but perhaps that's only because of your illness," added Kitty. "Father enjoyed it, and was awfully sorry to come home. Mother, on the contrary, was glad, and didn't enjoy it at all; but I think you were a trouble to her, Polly: she saw



you were getting ill. I'm not sure that a nervous fever is such a bad sort of illness," she went on with a deliberative air. "I don't suppose the pain is very serious, and it must be a pleasure to recover one's spirits gradually, as one gets a little better. I suppose the bank was the cause of it; it must have been a horrid shock to you, and if you had died the directors ought to have been hanged, in my opinion. Did you think about the bank all the time while you were ill?"

"I did not think of it at all," Pauline answered. "Do look at the clouds."

But it was only Ralph who turned his head for a moment; the others were intent on her.

"Tell us the truth, Polly," said Philip, "which do you like best, Frenchmen or Englishmen?"

"At present, dear Phil, I hate them both," said his sister.

"That's a sell for Ben Dunstan. He said he felt sure you had sense enough to like Englishmen. I say, Polly, was he very devoted on the journey home? He was here everyday, you know, inquiring after you."

"Pity he should waste his time," growled Ralph.

"I don't see that it need be waste of time. I like old Dunstan; he's a friend of mine. The most ornamental people are not always the best, you know, Polly."

"You had better tell that comforting piece of news to Mr. Dunstan himself," she answered, carelessly.

"That's one for you and your Dunstan," said Ralph to his brother.

"Well, but about France," said Philip,

"Go on; begin at the beginning, if you like, for I'm all in a muddle about it."

Pauline did not speak at once. She felt too weak and indifferent to be annoyed by Philip's teasing questions; and she lay against her cushion, gazing out past those three dark heads into "the golden remote wild west," her mind busy as far as it could be, with wonder at the change in herself, the advance into age and experience, which had made a wider and deeper gulf between her and her dear old companions than could ever divide them from "those younger ones." She was so strangely independent of them now. Nothing they could do or say made any difference to her. What did it matter if the boys were pleased or discontented, if Kitty was good or unmanageable? They and their humours were no longer her world, but only acci-

dents of every day. Even till she went to France she and they had no secrets from each other; but now she knew something that they did not know, and that she only hoped they might never learn so sadly. Those three children, thinking themselves so clever and worldly-wise, with their perfect confidence in themselves and in each other—how childish, how ignorant they were! Pauline looked at them now from another region. They could hardly be unconscious of this; but they put down the change to her illness, which no doubt accounted for the outward signs of it. She had fancied once or twice that Ralph suspected something, though he only showed it by snubbing Kitty and Philip when they chattered too inconsiderately; but Ralph was too dignified to show any curiosity; and after all there was enough

of trouble, outward and visible, to account for the quiet sadness of Pauline's recovery. And she loved these young creatures with all her heart, more even than in the old bright days. Their strength and honesty, their affection and tenderness for her, made a clear, sweet atmosphere to rest and grow strong in. If only they would not ask questions!

"I don't want to talk about France," she said at last, very gently; "the thought of it stifles me somehow, it makes my head feel dizzy. I would rather hear about your plans, if you don't mind. Speak, Ralph; tell me about them."

"With the greatest pleasure," said Ralph, his face brightening. "The facts are saddish; but it all depends on how you take them. We have agreed that it is a grand thing to work for

one's living. When my own hand keeps my head," shaking his fist in the air, "I shall feel equal to a king. What's more degrading than to be an idle fellow at school, cramming for useless exams? while a clerk in an office is a man, and a free man too, though he's only an infant of seventeen, like Philip Mowbray. Besides, he gets pay and feeds himself. Pay is the grand object in this world. Do nothing without being paid. If I were you, I'd make Aunt Lucia pay me for watering her flowers.

"Ralph talks as if he was the most mercenary wretch in the world," said Kitty. "One of these days he'll break our vow; I know he will."

"What vow?" said Pauline.

"Have *you* forgotten it? Don't you remember how we all six swore last summer never to marry for money, and

that the one who did should be cut by the other five?"

"Ah, last year; but then we were drones," said Ralph. "It's a different thing now. I believe we said we would never marry any one richer than ourselves. We had better cancel that vow, or make it over again with conditions."

"O Ralph, that would be weak!" cried Kitty. "If that's your grand independence—"

"Shut up; I'm talking to Polly. Well, you know my ideas on the subject of pay."

"I don't want your ideas," said Pauline. "I want the facts, do you see! I want to know what is really going to happen to us all. I am quite strong enough now to bear anything; but mother always changes the subject."

"You are a soft creature; we're all

tender about you," said Kitty, affectionately.

Ralph silenced her and went on. Though he was generally silent, he could talk very well when he chose, and was fond of explaining things. When he looked up seriously and opened his mouth to speak, the others listened with deference; for Ralph was their leader still, though he had ceased to be King Arthur or Lancelot, and though the idea of their fellowship was quite republican.

The facts were "saddish," as he said. Pauline found that she knew them all pretty well already. Dear old Cleeve Lodge was to be given up at Michaelmas, and Mr. and Mrs. Mowbray were to move to a little house near London, where he meant to employ himself in writing for papers and magazines. It was not unlikely that he would succeed,



if he had perseverance enough, for he knew a good many editors and literary people. The great French book was already begun; for George Mowbray was quite able to detach his mind from the many troubles which were weighing so heavily on his wife; and he had already sketched out two novels, each of which could be finished off in a few months, and was certain to bring in three or four hundred pounds at least. Only two things really troubled him: that his boys must leave school, give up college, and take clerkships in a London merchant's office, where the principal was a friend of his brother John; and that Aunt Lucia had immediately insisted on taking Pauline to live with her. If it had not been for his wife's earnest persuasions, he would have refused this last offer; and now Pauline herself was beginning to

wish that it had not been accepted; but when the thing was decided, for Aunt Lucia was impatient, she had been too weak to care at all what became of her.

As might be expected, Mrs. Mowbray was the person who suffered most from these changes, though she bore them bravely, and saw the wisdom or even necessity of them all. She was losing so much, poor woman—her pretty home, her good servants, her dear eldest child; and she knew very well that George and the children would not understand that life in the little new house could not be so free, or easy, or comfortable as at Cleeve. They would depend on her for everything, as they had always done, and would expect all sorts of things that she would have no means of getting. There were lines in Mrs. Mowbray's face, and her hair was beginning to turn gray.

All these things weighed upon her as she nursed Pauline through the illness that seized her directly they were at home. She did not think kindly of M. de Maulévrier; for though she knew nothing of that last scene, she had an uneasy knowledge that he had troubled Pauline a good deal; and as she watched the faded looks of her beautiful child, the purple stains under her eyes, the heavy lids, the transparent skin, the thin, tired-looking hands, the slow weary indifference with which she seemed to be returning from the weakness of the fever, she felt it would be both mad and wrong to refuse her to Aunt Lucia, who had the power and the will to do everything for her.

“If it had not been for all this we would never have done it,” she said to her husband. “But we must think of the child, not of ourselves.”

"You may be wise, but I believe you are wrong," he answered. "However, I don't oppose. You and Aunt Lucia together are too much for me. But she will be bored to death. She wants to come and help me with my books, and I shall never get on without her."

"You must both make up your minds; it is your share of the trouble," Mrs. Mowbray said, sadly. "I know this: it is the child's only chance of getting well."

"When she is well, we'll have her back again," said George, more cheerfully.

Ralph talked to his sister at some length about the prospects of the family. He was not quite sure that she heard all he said, for she never looked at him, except once or twice when the others roused her by clapping their hands in

approval of some of his remarks. The wonderful glory of the sky, which had now spread itself over all this side of the world, was some excuse for her wanderings eyes and thoughts; and Ralph, though he admired his own eloquence much more, was not inclined to be hard on Pauline just now.

Presently two more figures approached from the house, coming slowly up from the fir-wood into the great light on the cliff's brow.

"Father and Ben Dunstan," announced Philip; and Ralph immediately stopped his discourse, getting up and sauntering away from the group, a lanky black figure against the sky.

"How are you, my Polly?" said Mr. Mowbray.

"Better, papa, thank you, and very happy," she answered, smiling; and she

stretched out her hand to Mr. Dunstan, smiling at him too.

Ben looked as solemn as a judge, for to him this was a great moment. He had not seen her since the day they brought her home, perhaps six weeks ago, when she fainted several times on the journey, and talked nonsense in the train, when her father and mother, half distracted with trouble already, were so overwhelmed that he had to take the whole management of things on himself.

Mrs. Mowbray had perceived then what a nurse he was, and several times since had tried to thank him; but Ben regarded thanks as a refined kind of insult, and on these occasions always walked away at once.

Mr. Mowbray had talked so cheerfully of Pauline's recovery that Ben came up the hill expecting to find her quite herself,

and had hard work to hide the shock it gave him to see her wasted looks. He sat down on a stone, not speaking to anybody, and began pulling up bits of wild thyme ; but, after a moment, Pauline turned her face to him again.

“Tell me a little about Aunt Lucia,” she said.

“She is as young and beautiful as ever,” said Ben, gravely. “I mean it, Kitty ; you needn’t mock.”

“Well done ! I am glad to hear you stand up for her,” said Mr. Mowbray. “One supposes French women to be so graceful, and piquante, and so on. I admire them very much, but I did not see one who equalled Aunt Lucia ; did you, Polly ? ”

“Not Madame de Coigny, papa, or Madame de Loches ? ” said Pauline, softly.

“Well, they were much younger, but

most certainly they had not Aunt Lucia's refinement."

"Yes," said Mr. Dunstan, rather eagerly, "that refinement is her charm. It is something so perfect, you feel you can trust it through and through. She's made of that pure white silver, not strong enough to make things of, but unalloyed and beautiful."

"Aunt Lucia *would* be conceited, if she heard you!" exclaimed Kitty, staring in amazement. "Why, you are quite romantic about her, I declare!"

"Such a sky as this might inspire one, mightn't it?" said Ben, looking up and around; "though not, it seems, with anything better than humbug and flattery."

"Don't spoil your pretty speeches," said Pauline, very low.

Ben looked at her and fell into silence.



He was angry and unhappy, grieved to his heart at the sight of her, ashamed of having drawn down her gentle reproof on his cynicism. Yet there was a sweet haunting happiness at the root of things. She was better, she was pleased to see him, she noticed what he said, even if she did not like it, and a golden future was very near in which she would be living at Croome, and he might see her every day. There he sat, frowning, and with his strong fingers rooting up the wild thyme diligently.

“Who were those two people you mentioned just now?” said Philip to his father. “Madame Somebody—who was she? I wish you would tell me something about them. The fact is, you know, we’ve heard nothing about France at all.”

“Haven’t you? then it is time you did,” said Mr. Mowbray. “I’ll spin you

a yarn now, and Polly can correct my mistakes."

Ralph came back and fell into his place in the circle. The yarn began and went on prosperously; but, after about ten minutes of Tourlyon with Maulévrier in the near distance, Ben Dunstan's watchful eyes saw that Pauline, who had flushed a little at first, was growing paler and paler. She perhaps felt that he was watching her, for presently she looked towards him and moved her lips, which were very white. Her sister and brother saw nothing, absorbed in their father's well-told story. Ben got up quietly and came close to her; she looked straight up into his face, with eyes full of a strange agony, and whispered,

"I am so cold. I think I ought to go in."

"Ralph, come here," said Ben Dunstan.

“Your sister is going back to the house. You and I can carry her.”

Of course the interest in Mr. Mowbray's story gave place at once to eager alarm ; they had tired her, she had caught cold ; but Pauline shook her head and smiled at them.

“Don't come,” she said. “Go on telling them, papa. Mr. Dunstan and Ralph will take care of me.”

They helped her into her chair and carried her down the face of the hill, where the glory was beginning to fade now, through the twilight of the pines, down to the old home and to her mother. The hand she gave Ben, when she wished him good-night, was as cold as ice ; but she gave him a smile too, and the poor fellow went back to Croome more hopelessly in love than ever.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE SQUARE MAN.

MISS LUCIA MOWBRAY, in spite of her talk about hating foreigners and their customs, was, in her light unpractical way, as eager a matchmaker as any Frenchwoman. She had never done much business of this kind, it is true, but it was a form of activity which had always attracted her; for she flattered herself that she saw very far into people's characters, and knew their suitableness to each other a great deal better than they did themselves. There was not generally much prudence in her pet ideas, but now and then she hit on something which struck her as both spiritually and worldly

wise; and then, when she had no misgivings to torment her, she stuck to it, and worked at it heroically. Of this kind was her favourite scheme at present—a match between Ben Dunstan and Pauline Mowbray.

Her great liking for Ben seemed in most ways unaccountable, but Miss Mowbray's fancies were generally that: one can only suppose that she liked him because he was such an entire contrast to herself. Perhaps, too, knowing herself to be weak and flighty, she enjoyed the feeling of reliance on any one so solid. There may also have been something in the relationship, and in Ben's being the only representative of her mother's family, the old people at Croome: anyhow, she seemed to cling to Ben more and more as the months went on, and he showed more and more restlessness.

He had really been very troublesome that summer. He was always abusing Croome and its poor stupid people, always talking about "a shameful waste of strength;" corresponding with tiresome old parishioners at Forest Moor, who wanted him back again; refusing to care for novel-reading, or tennis, or flowers, or animals, or any of the decent occupations of a country parson. Science and manufactures, and political economy and smoke, shaking hands with groups of grimy colliers on the pit-bank; going down to take his share of their life in black stifling regions underground—these were the dreams with which he entertained himself—and Miss Mowbray, when she would listen to him. He was indeed the square man in the round hole; he had no room for his angles; the soft roundnesses of nature and life at Croome

were to him horrible provocations; the civil tones and ways of the people irritated him; nothing kept him there except a liking for his old cousin as strong as hers for him, but very seldom expressed as the young Mowbrays heard it that evening on the cliff.

Miss Mowbray had been in real fear of losing him several times that summer, but lately she had been easier in her mind; she had found the secret of keeping his heart in the south by a stronger attraction than her own. Sending him off to France, to carry the bad news to the Mowbrays, had been a fine stroke of policy: their trouble, the journey home with them, Pauline's illness, the hundred things that could be done to help them, seemed to have roused to life all the most civilised feelings in Ben's nature. In the latter part of that summer he

gave up talking about Forest Moor, and Miss Mowbray flattered herself that she had chained him effectually to Croome by having Pauline to live with her. There was no hurry about anything further, she thought: the girl was not yet really strong, and had the variableness of spirits, though she tried to hide it from her aunt, which naturally followed on such an illness. Besides, poor child, her father's losses, the breaking up of her home, were hard things to get over. When she was quite herself again, in beauty and brightness, it would be time enough for Aunt Lucia's delightful plan of removing her to the rectory; in the meanwhile her pale looks kept up Ben's interest and anxiety, the very best state of mind for him.

Miss Mowbray had a long large garden at Croome Court, closed in with old red



walls covered with ripening fruit, entered by an archway that was now a glowing mass of crimson Virginia creeper. From this gate a broad walk ran along the whole length of the garden; there were espaliered fruit-trees two or three yards from each side of the walk, and in front of them lower espaliers of clematis or honeysuckle or climbing roses. There were plenty of late roses out now in September, to mix with the crowds of sweet bright flowers that grew in the long borders next the walk. In the middle of the garden the walk divided itself for a few yards, and there was a pool and a fountain always playing, with a bench near it on a patch of grass, under the shade of an old rugged mulberry-tree. Here in the garden Miss Mowbray spent a great deal of her time, especially at this season of the year, when the

flowers were drawing near the end of their lovely lives, and seemed more sweet and brilliant than ever with a touch of autumn in the air.

She went about with a large pair of scissors, snipping off dead leaves and blossoms, or filling her basket with flowers for the house; sometimes she would seize a spud and make an attack on a small weed or two which had escaped the gardener's eyes. But she was not fond of weeding, as some people are; in spite of her passion for flowers she had no satisfaction in destroying their poorer neighbours. She was not sure that a dandelion or a thistle did not enjoy its life as much as a rose.

She and Ben Dunstan had had many talks, strolling up and down that long, broad walk together. He came and found her there one morning in September,

having had a message that she wished to see him. Pauline, who was now living at Croome, saw the two figures from her window as they paced backwards and forwards in the garden.

"I wanted to tell you," said Miss Mowbray to her cousin, "that I have finally made up my mind."

"What about?" said Ben.

"About the future."

"It's more than most people have," muttered Ben; on which Miss Mowbray lifted her eyes in astonishment.

"What do you mean, my friend?"

"The future. What do *you* mean?"

"I mean the future of Croome Court, and all my belongings, after I am dead."

"Oh, I see! That is not such a puzzling future. Well, I am glad you have made up your mind."

"Not so puzzling, is it? Then tell me

what I am going to do. I must warn you, though, that however disagreeable you may make yourself, I shall not change my mind. I have thought about it a great deal lately—for I really am growing old, though I can't manage to feel so—and I have seriously considered what my duty is, and I'm going to do it."

"You can't speak fairer than that!" said Ben, with a north-country twang and an odd smile.

"Understand that I am not asking your advice or your opinion. Mr. Johnson is coming this afternoon to make my will, and neither he nor I mean to be biassed by anybody. You will please to keep your distance, and I shall send Pauline out of the way too. I think, at the same time, that you had better know what I am doing: not Pauline; there is no occasion to tell her. Now you see I am perfectly

resolute, so you may guess, if you like, what I have determined upon."

"I shall guess what seems right to me."

"Very well—as you please; you will probably guess wrong. You and I never agree in anything."

Ben was silent for a minute: at last he said, "I told you long ago that I thought it would be unfair to leave it all to one girl."

"You did, sir; but I suppose you don't think so now?"

"Yes, I do; why should I have changed? I have not changed in anything. I feel just the same as I did then."

"Only more so. Very well; don't alarm yourself. I shall not leave it all to one girl."

"Either divide it amongst them, or leave

everything to her father. He wants it, poor fellow, and you ought to consider that—think of the boys.”

“What is the use of all this?” asked Miss Mowbray, calmly. “I told you I had made up my mind, and did not wish for any advice. Keep your place, if you please. I know George’s wants as well as you do, and I perceive that other people feel for him and his boys. Pray can you tell me how it happens that Philip is staying at school after all?”

“I could tell you, but it is a secret, and therefore I shall not,” Ben replied, while, for once in his life, he coloured crimson and looked away from her laughing eyes.

“No, don’t; secrets ought to be kept,” said Miss Mowbray. “Well, do you think George knows how to spend money? Wouldn’t it all go into the publishers’

pockets, instead of doing his children any good?"

"His wife would take care of that."

"I shall not trouble her with that care. As you won't help me by guessing, I must tell you. I mean to leave George five thousand pounds, for I like him, though he is a goose; and three thousand to Pauline, as she can't live with me for ever. The rest, the house and all, I shall leave—"

"Three thousand won't make much of an income for her," grumbled Ben.

"She can dress on it. I don't suppose she need do anything more; at least, that depends on you. Everything else I leave to you, though your rude interruptions don't deserve it. Ah yes, I knew you would be furious, but I tell you I am doing my duty."

After this there was a silence of some

minutes, till Ben said very abruptly, "I don't follow you. I don't know what you mean about your duty."

"No, I did not learn it from you. But now let us be reasonable; I am tired of all this sparring. The fact is, I respect my ancestors, and I should like the place to go back to the old name. I have not forgotten your ill-conditioned speeches one day in the summer—about selling it and going away. I think it possible you may not be as bad as your word; still, your bad intentions don't alter my feeling about it; and I think when you are a little older you may be a little wiser. At any rate, the responsibility will be yours, not mine. My plan for you is to have Croome, and live here, and to marry my dear child Pauline. Then I shall have done my best for you both; do you understand?"



“And if she won’t have me?” said Ben, with a grim smile. “Do you think it likely, after all those splendid Frenchmen—”

“Pauline is not quite a fool, I hope,” said Miss Mowbray, sharply. “Very well; if she won’t have you she must make the best of her three thousand pounds, and, unless she marries somebody else, I shall keep her as long as I live. But I think you had better lose no time, for you can quite well afford to marry as you are.”

“Yes, if I am to marry at all, I certainly shall not wait for Croome,” said Ben. “I hope I may not have it for a hundred years. There’s no hurry, however. She is getting stronger and brighter every day, and she had better not be bothered just at present. Only I beg you won’t tell her of these kind in-

tentions of yours, for I prefer standing on my own merits."

"Do you think she would marry you for the prospect of Croome? You are either very modest or very mercenary," said Miss Mowbray, smiling. "No, she is a better girl than that. But I told you before that I meant to say nothing to her; I don't care to talk of my affairs to everybody. You, of course, are different; I like you to know that you will be my heir; and I think, perhaps in spite of yourself, you will take more interest in the place for knowing it. It is a relief to my mind to have this settled, though you are, without exception, the most ungracious man I ever met."

"Well, you know," said Ben, "I'm made of stiffish clay, and the fact has hardly penetrated to my brain yet. To-morrow, when I have thought it over, perhaps I'll

write you a letter. But, seriously, I still hope that you will change your mind; for if—if she won't, you see, I don't suppose I shall ever marry at all, and then it would be quite thrown away on me. Couldn't you put off this affair for a few months?"

"No, my friend; life is uncertain. I must do it this afternoon. And it is not Pauline I think of so much as you. She is sure to marry somebody; but if you two marry it will be a very happy fulfilment of all my wishes."

Ben walked along, looking gravely on the ground. It was a solemn moment, and as he thought the thing over, words seemed gradually to fail him. At last he said, "Thank you;" and Miss Mowbray gave a little laugh of satisfaction.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A RASH MOMENT.

ALL that afternoon, while his cousin and her lawyer were settling his prospects in life, Mr. Dunstan was visiting people in his parish. He disliked this employment, yet it was a relief to him to bestow a few hearty scoldings where they were wanted, and to-day, perturbed as he was by Miss Mowbray's announcement in the morning, his poor parishioners found him crosser than usual. The more he thought about being owner of Croome, the less he liked it. It seemed to him very hard upon the Mowbrays, though not exactly unfair to them, for of course the place was old

Dunstan property, and he, as far as he knew, was the only existing representative of the name. If it had been unfair, he would have made a great deal more difficulty about it; would, in fact, he assured himself, have refused to have anything to do with it. As it was, he knew almost by instinct that both Mr. and Mrs. Mowbray expected their aunt to leave everything to Pauline, even more now that she seemed to have adopted her; and he himself believed that Miss Mowbray, before she discovered him, had intended something of the kind—perhaps had even made a will to that effect. This knowledge made the new arrangement painful and disagreeable to Ben: he heartily hated the thought that Pauline might have to choose between him and poverty. It seemed to take all the romance out of his love for her.

The happy tender fancy which, since he came to Croome, had flowered among his stern realities, of winning her in time to trust and like him, and to marry him in the end because she liked him better than anybody else—this pleasant doubtful twilight of hope, like a gray summer morning, was really to his mind more hopeful than the glaring scorching sunshine of riches, which seemed to burn all uncertainty away.

“She would marry me if she knew of it,” Ben thought to himself. “If she didn’t care much herself they would make her, they would persuade her. They would bully her into it, Lucia and all; and the worst of it is, I know she can’t keep her own counsel; she will tell Pauline to-night or to-morrow, and then I shall be a different person at once. I wish unmarried people had to

leave their property to the nation. Well, after all," he went on reasoning, "I'm an ass, you know. If I get her in the end, what does it matter how the thing comes about? Perhaps the money won't really have made any difference, but I shall always think it did. And we should have done so much better without it; for if I have her, and Croome and the whole thing, I know I shall get fat and lazy, and stick here like a useless fungus all my life. I've been here too long already, that is the truth. I ought to have gone away as soon as I was strong; this sort of place is ruin to one's soul. Pretty faces, rich people insisting on leaving one things—how is a fellow to work himself free of it all?" and he thought of various cases like his own in the world's history, with reflections which were not too compli-

mentary, either to Miss Mowbray or Pauline.

He lighted his pipe after leaving the last cottage, and walked down a high stony lane, bordered with walls where ferns and ivy grew, with young fir plantations behind them here and there. Before him stretched a wide lonely view, grand in its outlines, with rising and falling sweeps of distant down and field and wood. The horizon was blue and near, and great lurid thunder-clouds were rising, almost rushing up the sky, though not a breath of air moved the trees where Ben was walking. He was surprised, for, thinking of other things, he had not noticed the weather, and he quickened his pace and called his dog from hunting in the bracken; a heavy storm was coming up, and would be upon them in a few minutes. Ben was



not a thorough country Englishman, and did not much like a wetting, except under certain circumstances. He remembered just then, with some sadness, that same little incident of overtaking Pauline and carrying the basket to old Betty Stocks, which had come into her mind as she sat on the terrace at Boiscarré. This was the very hill where it had happened: the wind was the other way then, and the rain drove in their faces as they climbed it together.

Near the end of the lane there was a gate, from which a short road across a field led to the rectory: this was not the chief entrance, which was nearer the church and lower down the hill, but it was a convenient way to and from the higher part of the parish, and it was the Rector's way home now. Before opening the gate he glanced

down the lane, and away in the valley he could see the tall trees and the chimneys of Croome Court. There was a short cut across the fields, which he made use of constantly; and now, as he looked that way, and felt he must resist the temptation and stay at home this evening, the field-gate opened, and Pauline herself, with a basket in her hand, came walking rather quickly up the lane. Ben at his gate was hidden at first by a holly-bush, and she started a little when she saw him standing there waiting for her, having deposited his pipe on one of the gate-posts.

"There's going to be a thunderstorm, and you will be caught in it," said Ben, looking at her gravely.

"Is there? yes I'm afraid so," said Pauline, looking round at the sky. "I shall get to old Betty's first I hope.

I am taking her something for Aunt Lucia," with a mischievous smile for Ben, who did not, however, launch out into his theories. He only said,

"I have just been there, and the house is locked up. Betty is at her daughter's, on the other side of the hill. You and your basket will both get a soaking."

"How tiresome! I had better go home," said Pauline. "Aunt Lucia has got Mr. Johnson with her, and she told me to go out for a walk, and not to come back till he was gone. But it seems I can't help it."

"You will get the worst of the storm on your way down the hill. It is beginning now. Listen."

There was a growl of thunder on the other side of the valley, and the dark masses of cloud came crowding up,

hanging heavily over their heads, while two or three great drops of rain fell on the stony ground between them.

“Come in and take shelter,” said Ben.

If Pauline felt any hesitation, she did not show it. Ben took her basket, and they walked together across the field to the house. They were just in the garden when the first flash of lightning, almost blinding in its brilliancy, was followed by a crash of thunder that seemed to shake the ground. Then the rain came down suddenly like a water-spout. Ben caught Pauline’s hand, and they ran along the path and into the porch together.

“That was a near thing,” said Ben, cheerfully.

He was looking his best just then; all frowns had disappeared, and his eyes, which were really fine, had their

brightest and happiest expression. Pauline, flushed and smiling, did not seem at all displeased with her situation.

"The question is," she said, "how am I to get these things to old Betty? Had I better take them back, and come again to-morrow? or will it be safe to leave them with you?"

"It's a difficult point—you had better think it over," said Ben. "You will have time, for the storm won't be done just yet. Come in, please."

He took her into the drawing-room, a pretty room with two windows looking into the garden, but with an uninhabited feeling about it, and rather dark and chilly in the rain. It was not so comfortable as many bachelors' rooms, and yet there was nothing ugly in it; it had the making of a charming room,

as Miss Lucia Mowbray had often reflected, when she was building castles for Ben; she rather liked the severity of its chairs and its polished floor, its intelligent-looking bookcase, and the few prints from good pictures which were pleasant companions on the wall. While Pauline went to the window to look out at the rain, Ben lighted the fire, which blazed up cheerfully, and pushed forward his best chair.

“Do you like a lower chair? There’s one in my den. I’ll fetch it,” he said, half in apology for a certain discomfort which struck him with new force suddenly.

“O no, thank you—but I didn’t want a fire. It is very pleasant, though, in such weather,” she said, correcting herself; and she came and sat down by the fire, and held out her hands to it,

glancing up with a smile at Ben as he stood on the other side.

He did not look quite the same as usual. They say that a woman always knows when a man is in love with her; but one fancies there may be exceptions to this rule. If she is young and pretty and ambitious, and not a flirt by nature—and if he, besides being unattractive, keeps a stern guard over himself—still more when she becomes preoccupied with the thought of somebody else, beside whom all other men are merely stocks and stones—I think she may meet her unknown lover and talk to him a dozen times a day, without finding him out in spite of himself—that is, till he begins to hope a little. Then by some look or word or silence he will almost certainly betray himself.

Pauline, of course, had not been unconscious that Ben admired her, or that she could trust his friendship further than that of most people. She liked and respected him more than he knew, and did not much mind his peculiarities; but certainly till that day, having no idea of Aunt Lucia's wishes, and paying no attention to the teasing hints of the children, she had never thought of him at all in the light of a lover. Even now it was nothing more than a momentary suspicion which crossed her mind; the thing was impossible, absurd, not worth thinking of, and she determined to ignore it completely.

The storm was a great help: for some time it was tremendous, and gave one every excuse for watching it and talking about it. Every two or three minutes the room was lit up by an



unearthly glare of lightning, and the thunder, which roared immediately, shaking the house, and making conversation an absurdity, went growling and grumbling on till the next flash came. Pauline sat very still; she was not afraid of the storm, but it awed her a little, and she thought of Aunt Lucia's anxiety. Ben walked about from one window to the other, watching the rain, which came tearing down in sheets from the black clouds, and in the intervals of comparative peace talking about electricity. Now and then there was a long pause, while the elements had it all their own way, and Pauline looked at the crackling fire and mused on the chances of getting home. In quite a measurable space of time, she felt, this sort of thing would become a bore.

“Your aunt will have Mr. Johnson to

herself for a good long time," said Ben, walking up to the fireside.

"Yes; she will be rather bored, won't she? But I suppose they have plenty of business to talk about. She said something about half an hour; but Mr. Johnson is a talkative old man, isn't he? I don't think he would have let her off as easily as that, even if there had been no storm."

"No; he will have an opinion, and the case will be argued, though your aunt, of course, will end by having her own way."

"People ought to have their own way in their own affairs," said Pauline, smiling.

"Not always: there are abstract principles," said Ben. "Do you know what the special business is this afternoon?"

"No," she said, a little surprised. "Do you?"

Ben did not answer at once; he was not quite prepared for this counter question, and looked down, frowning, to collect his ideas.

"If I did," he said, "it might not be right for me to tell you."

"You would leave me in painful curiosity; how very horrid of you!" said Pauline. "But if you know, and I don't, I shall be dreadfully hurt, and very much offended both with Aunt Lucia and you. In fact, I am now, for I saw Aunt Lucia consulting you this morning in the garden. So the only thing you can do is to tell me at once."

Pauline was certainly herself again. Her eyelashes lifted with a laughing glance at Ben, who was trying to be grave and sulky, but looking chiefly foolish.

“Don’t tease me,” he said, in a gruff voice. “I shall not tell you anything about it.”

“Thanks; that is so kind of you,” said Pauline.

After this they were both quite silent for several minutes. The thunder and lightning were going off, but the rain was still coming down in a steady deluge. Pauline looked round at the window once or twice, and half hid a little yawn. Ben, after some reflection, determined to let that awkward subject drop. He did not quite care for being laughed at, and would not allow himself to be weak, even if the alternative was being disagreeable. At the same time his guest must be entertained somehow, and Ben thought he might find some general subject which would be safe and satisfactory. At heart he was rather

savage, and knew, with a half-conscious pain, that he loved to see Pauline brighten and laugh, even at his expense, and would have knelt down at her feet there and then with the risk of being only laughed at more.

“Would you care to be rich?” he said, abruptly.

“Yes; I should like it of all things,” said Pauline; and then she looked up with a shade of interest and curiosity, wondering why he had asked the question. It was an odd question for him to ask, she thought, considering all the circumstances. Ben, who had spoken as men generally do, without any double meaning, was a little disappointed by her answer, which he took quite literally, and without the least understanding the look that accompanied it.

“Would you, really?” he said. “Why?”

"For every reason under the sun. I need not count them—I couldn't."

"Give me one."

"Well, for papa and the others, if it is a personal question," said Pauline, half smiling; but she knew that he believed her, with all his cynical pretences.

"You might be rich without being able to help them," said Ben, gravely.

"Then I should not call myself rich. But I don't quite understand you."

"There are different ways in which money may come to a woman. Of course, if it is left to her straight away, she is independent, and can do what she likes with it—give it all to her friends if she chooses. But the other way—marrying a man with money—that doesn't always mean that she will have plenty to throw away. The more a man has, the less he cares, sometimes—

I mean that he might be willing to spend thousands a year on *you*, but not at all on your brothers and sisters."

"I see—he had better be avoided," said Pauline, carelessly. "On the whole, I'll choose to have the money independently, and then I can follow all my fancies. I don't believe, you know, that there is anybody who wouldn't like to be rich, if possible."

"Don't you?" said Ben.

"No, I don't. You would, I'm sure. If you say no I shall not believe you."

Ben smiled. "Very good; that saves trouble."

"You don't pretend to be contented, do you?" Pauline went on rather restlessly; the soft unruffled serenity of her younger days had certainly passed away. You don't feel that you can do everything you like?"

"Far from it; but it is not want of money that hampers me."

"I think you will find it is, in the end," said Pauline. "Money can do almost everything, for one's self and other people too."

"*Almost* everything," Ben assented. "But, you see, the things I want are just the things that money could not give me—at least I hope it couldn't," he added, in a lower voice.

Her way of talking made him a little nervous. He had imagined that she was perfectly unworldly, that money could never be of any consequence to her personally, however other people might seek it and value it for her. He now suspected that she might some day marry a man—himself, even—for his money, without much persuasion from her relations; and he felt sad and bitter and cynical at heart.



Pauline little knew how seriously her talk was taken, but she did not care for the subject enough to go on with it. She got up and went to the window, suddenly finding out that the rain was much less, that the clouds were rolling away, that she would soon be released, and able to go where she liked.

Mr. Dunstan began asking her advice about some bank in the garden, which he thought of turving over and planting with shrubs. Then he took her into his study, a bare and very smoky little room, and showed her where he was going to put a new bookcase, and consulted her about a bow-window. She entered into his plans with gentle pleasantness, her teasing humour having passed away.

“Do you dislike this house?” said Ben, as they stood in the study window, which commanded a view of a different tract of sky.

"No, I like it. It is cheerful even on a wet day," said Pauline, politely.

"You couldn't live in such a house."

"Do I give myself such airs?" she said a little playfully; and then she added with a shade of sadness, "our new home is much smaller, I suppose, and the others have to live there. Might I say something without offending you?"

Ben was suddenly interested in the window-blind, which he pulled down and up twice before he answered her.

"What?"

"I know it offends you to be thanked," she said, smiling; "but I know, too, that *you* are that friend who is so good to Philip. I'm sure of it, and so is Aunt Lucia. I'm not going to thank you; I only want to tell you that I know it."

"Very well, that's enough; you are two wise women," said Ben, more

patiently than she had expected. "Now there is something I want to say to you, which will probably offend you, and will seem absurd, after all you have been saying to-day. I ought, perhaps, to have been discouraged; perhaps I am, but that's nothing. Could you make up your mind to live here?"

The sturdy Ben behaved at this crisis in a cowardly manner. He did not look at her as he spoke, and half turning away, seized the blind-tassel and tugged it violently.

Pauline was horror-struck, and stood perfectly silent. Many thoughts and visions chased each other through her brain in that half minute; she was far enough from the bare little study, and Ben Dunstan, poor honest creature, was nowhere. Her heart and her mind had both been hurt in France, more seriously

than people knew; and though that kind illness made it all seem a long time ago, the bruises were still there, and could not be touched without pain. She was roused from her dream by Ben's voice. He turned round so suddenly, that she started and shrank back towards the door; but he spoke very quietly. Her face, her quick avoiding movement, were answer enough for him.

"I see you can't," he said. "I'm sorry I asked you."

There was another pause, and this time he stood sadly looking at her.

"I am very sorry," Pauline murmured after a moment.

"No, you are not; why should you be?" said Ben. "It has stopped raining. Would you like to go home now? I advise you to keep to the road; the fields will be swimming."

He went out of the room, and along the hall to the front door. Pauline followed him silently. At the door she gave him her hand, glancing shyly up, for a moment. She was faintly amused, as well as surprised and sorry at what had happened; but, of course, this did not appear in her face, and even the feeling died away under his earnest gaze. Ben might be uncouth, but he was not in the least ridiculous.

“Good-bye—thank you,” said Pauline.

“I suppose I ought to have waited; but I had a reason,” said Ben. “It might have made no difference, though.”

“No, never any difference,” she answered, gently. “I *am* very sorry. Please forget all about it.”

“Forget all about it—yes,” said Ben.

He did not attempt to go with her, even through the garden; but as soon as

she had set out over the wet gravel, under the still threatening sky, he turned back into his house and shut the door.

## CHAPTER VII.

### MISS MOWBRAY'S TROUBLES.

THE more Pauline thought about her adventure of that afternoon, the more it vexed and troubled her. She had been succeeding so well in silencing recollections, in refusing to think of such things, and throwing all her interest into home affairs, entering eagerly into the boy's plans, writing long letters to them and Kitty, laughing with Aunt Lucia over her flowers, sympathising and helping in her charities. There really seemed to be plenty of harmless pleasant occupation to fill up every day, and she was beginning to sleep without dreams at night. Ben Dunstan's sudden attempt at love-making

bored her inexpressibly. She did not want to think of any life but Aunt Lucia's, simple and free from care. Ben, of course, did not touch her heart in the least; and, though she was sorry for him at the moment, further reflection made him seem both presumptuous and stupid. Why should he have suggested such a thing at all? He had had no encouragement, no right to expect any answer but one. Why could not the tiresome man have left things on their old comfortable footing—he and she and Aunt Lucia all nice and friendly together? Now there would be a horrid awkwardness—at least Pauline feared so; but she thought she would not tell Aunt Lucia, who would certainly see it as she did, and be angry with him for his stupidity. Yes, Pauline thought it would be kinder to keep his secret, though he hardly deserved such consideration.



Some day she might tell her mother, but not in a letter, perhaps to fall into the hands of the children. Thinking of them brought Philip to her mind, and his great debt of gratitude to Mr. Dunstan: one must confess that he had merits, that he was very kind and generous; but Philip's sister could not see that she was bound to pay his debt for him, and she did Ben the justice of believing that he did not think so either.

When she got home that afternoon, tired and wet and troubled, she found Mr. Johnson gone, and her aunt in the highest spirits; she was walking about the house singing, playing with a kitten, and so flighty was her state of mind that she had forgotten all about the thunderstorm, and only half understood when Pauline, giving her credit for a little anxiety, told her how she had been sheltered at the rectory.

"What fun!" said Miss Mowbray. "I hope the parson was agreeable."

"It was no particular fun. I was rather bored," said Pauline, quietly.

"Were you? Poor creature! I put him out of temper this morning," said Aunt Lucia, much amused. "But the visit ought to have charmed him. What took you there? I forget."

"The thunderstorm," said Pauline, looking gravely at her aunt, who was smiling and dangling a string to the kitten.

"To be sure. Forgive me, my child. I only thought you didn't generally pay visits to young men. I quite forgot the storm. Mr. Johnson was here all through it, you see; he is only just gone."

"I hope he was satisfactory."

"O, delightful! Much nicer than usual, for he agreed with me; so we had no trouble at all, and got through our busi-

ness charmingly. I feel as happy and light-hearted as if I had dropped a bundle off my shoulders, like the man in the *Pilgrim's Progress*."

"Your sins would not make a very heavy bundle," said Pauline, her grave young face softening into a smile.

"My dear, that is all you know about it," said Aunt Lucia, shaking her head. "However, alas, it is not my sins I have dropped, but my responsibilities, which really were heavy. I don't mean that my sins are light; but I don't feel the weight of them so much, which is the fault of my bad useless conscience."

Pauline, of course, concluded that Aunt Lucia had been making her will, but she did not feel more than a very faint curiosity about its contents, and with her own vexation of that day weighing on her mind, she was rather silent all the evening,

while her aunt laughed and chattered and gave hints from which a less absent person might have gained a good deal of information.

The next day Miss Mowbray took her niece to a large garden-party at Sir John Marston's, the county member, who lived at a beautiful house near Pauline's old home at Cleeve. Ben Dunstan had been asked to this party, and they believed that he intended to go, but, to Pauline's relief, and Miss Mowbray's disappointment, he was not there.

All the people welcomed Pauline very kindly; they were old neighbours, and it was her first appearance in the world since her illness and the misfortunes of her family. Everybody smiled upon her, and without any uncomfortable sympathy, for evidently she was not at all to be pitied; on the contrary, she appeared to them a

more important person than ever before : her aunt had plainly adopted her, she would, of course, be heiress of Croome : what could be more right, more natural, more correct and comfortable ? Grace and Adelaide Marston, very distinguished girls indeed, who had never cared much for Pauline Mowbray when she lived at Cleeve Lodge, now changed their minds and manners, and received her with the frank winning sweetness which they kept for their especial favourites. Adelaide Marston and her young brother, who had been snubbed for his admiration of Pauline in years gone by, finding that she was not strong enough to play tennis, walked or sat about with her half the afternoon.

Every one was very happy, except Sir John Marston, who came up to his eldest daughter, and asked, with some irritation, what Jack was doing all this time.

"He is somewhere not far off, with Addie and Pauline Mowbray," said Grace, with an indifferent air.

Sir John coughed and grunted.

"Jack's a donkey," he observed. "He had better not be a donkey. That nonsense over again!" with some more unpleasant mutterings.

"It might not be such nonsense, after all," said Miss Marston, who was always very cool and superior in her manner to her father.

"You are mistaken; I have just been telling your mother so," said Sir John, gruffly. "Old Miss Mowbray won't leave all that land to a girl. Johnson's her man of business; if she wanted to do it, he wouldn't let her. He knows that such things can't be done, especially when there is a proper male heir."

"Who is the proper male heir?"

"Why, young Dunstan, of course. That Australian fellow—that parson at Croome."

"That creature!" said Grace, indignantly. "He is third-rate, positively third-rate. What should we do with him in the county? O, no, papa, I don't agree with you at all! Miss Mowbray would do very wrong, I am sure, if she left him Croome. We don't want him; he is a dreadful creature, really."

"He is a preposterous ass, from all I hear," said Sir John. "But whatever he is, the man ought to have the land that belonged to his people."

"I hope Miss Mowbray won't agree with you," said Grace, half-frightened, for her father generally turned out to be right in the end. "We don't want a third-rate creature like that at Croome."

At this point Miss Marston looked round,

and saw that the three young people in question, coming up quietly over the grass, were so near that they almost must have heard her last words. Her voice was naturally distinct, and she raised it when she spoke to her father, who was a little deaf. Adelaide was smiling, and in Pauline's cheeks there was an extra shade of pink. They had heard, evidently ; but after all, what did it matter? She had been speaking in Pauline's interest, and though she could not, of course, say so, she must agree with her. They began talking about something else. Sir John walked off, leaving the young people together, and very soon Grace had forgotten the little awkwardness altogether.

Pauline, however, remembered the words, and knew very well of whom they were spoken. Angry with Ben as she had been,



and glad as she was not to see him that afternoon, the words spoiled her pleasure and made her feel angry. If it had been desirable or possible, she would have spoken bravely for Ben at that moment. Ben was a gentleman by birth, though his bringing up and adventures had not been those of an ordinary gentleman; it seemed like a rudeness to Aunt Lucia to call her cousin "third-rate" in that scornful manner. In old days Pauline had never liked Grace Marston, and now again she felt that she did not like her; it was the repulsion of a soft nature from a hard one. She was not amused any more by the friendly talk of Jack and Adelaide; she felt sad and lonely, and escaped as soon as she could to tell her aunt that she was tired, and would like to go home. Miss Mowbray was quite ready. She did not care particularly for the Marstons,

and was angry with Ben for staying away ; so they set off early on their long drive back to Croome.

Pauline did not think, as Grace Marston's words went on tormenting her, that these people knew anything certain about her aunt's intentions with regard to Croome ; it seemed impossible that they should. They were no doubt talking over the probabilities, Sir John and his daughter ; "talking over *me*," thought Pauline. It was not a new idea to her ; her own people had always fancied that she would be Aunt Lucia's heir, and now to herself it seemed likelier than ever before. But she was infinitely more indifferent to all hopes of the kind than she had pretended to poor Ben the day before ; and, like her father, she loved Aunt Lucia far too much to care for the thought of succeeding her in anything.

That evening, after dinner, she was sitting alone in the drawing room, rather weary and dispirited. The lamp was on the table, but she was doing nothing; Aunt Lucia was wandering outside in the dusk among the flowers. Presently Pauline heard her come into the hall and stop there; the drawing-room door was half-open, and she could hear her aunt tear open a letter. Then came a quick little exclamation, then silence for a minute or two; then Miss Mowbray walked into the drawing-room, her blue eyes shining, her delicate cheeks flushed with excitement.

“Read that,” she said, giving the letter to Pauline, who glanced through it, flushing too, and gave it back to her.

It was a letter from Ben Dunstan, saying that he had made up his mind to resign the living of Croome. He had long wished to do so, he said, but since their

talk yesterday he had found out that it could not be put off any longer. He might grieve and even offend her; he should be sorry for that, but there were worse things still, and he could only advise her to send once more for Mr. Johnson, and to make her arrangements for the future as if he did not exist. The letter was proud and stiff and sore; its expressions were ungracious, addressed to the kindest friend this young man had ever had. Pauline saw that her aunt was keenly pained by the letter, and did not know what to say, in her consciousness of having been the immediate cause of it.

“He is cracked. I don’t know what he means!” said Miss Mowbray. “You would think, wouldn’t you, that I had done him some great injury? On the contrary, I’ve been planning to make him the luckiest and happiest man in the world. He knew

it! I told him all about it yesterday morning, and actually made him say thank you. Now he is wild to shake off the dust of Croome, and doesn't care a straw whether I am vexed or not. He knows he could do nothing that would vex me more."

"It seems a great pity," murmured Pauline.

"Writing, too, instead of telling me face to face! I knew Ben had faults enough, but I always thought he had plenty of courage. I can't understand it. What can have happened since I saw him to bring him to the point of writing that letter? I declare I shall take him at his word, and send for Mr. Johnson again. O, my dear Pauline, why should a poor old woman have so many troubles?"

Pauline sat looking on the floor, and did not speak at once. She perceived that it

might matter very much to Ben, if her aunt took this sudden resolve of his as a selfish unreasonable freak. She was very unwilling; but it seemed her duty to give such explanation as she could, by telling her aunt what had happened yesterday. She did not imagine that this could be bad news, apart from its consequence of Ben's going away, and she felt half-inclined to laugh as she began: "Aunt Lucia, do you know, I am afraid it is partly my fault. I was extremely surprised—and I'm sure I never did anything to put it into his head—but Mr. Dunstan asked me yesterday—"

"You don't mean to say so!" cried Aunt Lucia, breathlessly, without waiting for the end of the sentence; and she sprang out of her chair, and came up to Pauline with both hands out-stretched. "In such a hurry! what a romantic idiot

the man is! Dear old Ben—he did not want you to be influenced. But, Pauline, you said you were bored; you said he wasn't agreeable. Why didn't you tell me at once, you tiresome child?"

"Why should I?" said Pauline, with a little gentle wonder; "one doesn't talk about those things."

"Not to *me*! why you are as unfeeling as Ben himself."

"But really," persisted Pauline, "one does not talk about a thing when one wants it forgotten. Don't you see, dear, I was very much surprised and bothered; but I told him at once that it never could be. I didn't think of driving him away from Croome—that seems a great pity, and rather stupid of him."

Miss Mowbray turned away, and began walking about the room. After one or two despairing sighs, and tosses of her

head, she came back and stood in front of Pauline.

“What a muddle he has made,” she said, “and all with the best intentions! Of course he took you by surprise, and it was all among the thunder and lightning, and the house looked dark and dingy, and Ben was as gruff as a bear—he couldn’t expect you to say anything but no. Just like him, too, to take you at your word, and write me a savage letter like this. I don’t mind it half so much, now that I know the meaning of it. And I’m not angry with you for you were in a fix, and I should have done the same myself. Stupid creature!”

“Yes, I thought it was rather stupid of him,” said Pauline, calmly.

“But there was something beautiful in it, too,” Miss Mowbray went on. “He



has been in love with you for years, as no doubt he told you, with my knowledge and approval. Well, yesterday morning I told him what I meant to do for him, and he was immediately tormented with the fear that when he asked you, you would accept him because of that, and not for his own merits—which are not so very small, in his opinion as well as mine. Now he is punished for his two suspicions—of your being mercenary, and of my being unable to keep a secret from you for a single day. Just like all men—but Ben shows his weakness more plainly than most of them.”

Pauline laughed, a little hardly; there was nothing to please her in what Aunt Lucia said; she did not like the idea of having been talked and planned about by these two excellent friends.

“He certainly was mistaken,” she said,

"if he thought that anything could make any difference. I told him so."

"But you will think about it, and change your mind," said Aunt Lucia. "He can wait—for months—for a year—he might even go away for a time. Don't you see, Pauline, I have left him Croome. It seemed the right thing to do, and Mr. Johnson agreed with me."

She spoke in a sad pleading tone, standing before Pauline, who sat looking on the floor.

"Have you?" said the girl, without lifting her eyes. "Yes, I daresay you are right. But, dear, that cannot make any difference to me."

"I know, I know. I never thought it would," said Aunt Lucia, impatiently. "But you are disappointing me so dreadfully. I thought of you all the time. I thought I was doing it for you as much

as for him. I had set my heart upon it, Pauline. You can't make me so unhappy!"

"But, dear Aunt Lucia," said Pauline, getting up, putting her arms round her, and kissing the troubled face, "you can't wish me to marry a man—I don't even like?"

"Ah, you don't know how good he is," sighed Miss Mowbray. "He is as good as gold, and he would do anything in the world for you. Don't you believe that? Won't you come to your senses some day?"

"I do believe he is good," Pauline answered; "but one doesn't care for people because of that, you know. I shall always think of him as I do now. I'm chiefly sorry because it vexes you."

"O, I was born to be vexed; pray don't think about me," said Aunt Lucia, laughing.

She went on talking for a long time, not trying to persuade Pauline any more, for she saw that would be useless, but making the best of things, as her way was. She thought she would not oppose Ben's going, but would let him go, hoping that he would come to his senses in time, and know where his right place was. She perceived that, after all, he was not so necessary, now that she had her dear pretty Pauline to live with her.

Pauline was rather amused to find herself entering earnestly into all Aunt Lucia's plans and ideas. Her aunt told her the contents of her will, making her promise to tell nobody, and talked seriously about the future, about duties and responsibilities, breaking off in the middle of it all into some sudden absurdity which made Pauline smile gently. They had never been such friends as they were

that evening. Aunt Lucia certainly bore Pauline no malice for disappointing her.

"Well, my child," she said at last, "I must find somebody else for you."

"No, please," said Pauline, "I am quite contented."

"The difficulty will be to find anybody good enough," her aunt went on, without noticing this. "If you could have Croome it wouldn't matter; but now I am afraid you can't. I shall see, at least, how Ben behaves himself."

"Aunt Lucia," said Pauline, "why did you never accept any of those people who wanted to marry you?"

"Because they wanted Croome, and not me. You won't have that difficulty, my poor child; but that is why you really must be married. An old maid must be rich if she is to be happy."

“O, I don’t know that,” said Pauline, rather wearily.

Her aunt, who was wandering as usual about the room, stopped and looked at her. The most careless person could not help seeing the girl’s look and attitude of tired depression, into which she seemed to fall back whenever she was not smiling or speaking. For the first time it occurred to Miss Mowbray that Pauline’s late illness did not quite account for this background of sadness, which had been there, more or less visible, ever since she came to Croome.

Miss Mowbray crossed the room and sat down by Pauline, bending forward and taking her hands with a sudden eager tenderness. Her manner was irresistible, and Pauline could not turn away, though she shivered from head to foot with a knowledge of what was coming.

"My own child, tell me—is there somebody else? I see, I understand."

"No, please don't think so."

"Now you are trying to deceive me, and that is no use at all. My dear, who is he? can I ask him here? But it would be too cruel; we must wait till poor Ben is gone. Where does he live? Why didn't somebody tell me before? and why don't you look happier about it?"

"How you jump to conclusions!" said Pauline, half laughing, but with tearful eyes. "You talk of asking a person here who does not exist."

"Then he did exist. Am I hurting your feelings? Forgive me, dear, but I love you so much, and I am so dreadfully curious, I can't bear to have things hidden from me. I like to know people's histories all through when I love them.

Is it quite hopeless? You can't deceive me, child; you had better trust me, and I may be able to help you—who knows?"

"Nobody can help, and nobody ever could," said Pauline, in a low voice. "It was always hopeless, and wrong, and wretched, and impossible from the beginning."

"Good heavens, child! Wrong! Was he married?" exclaimed Aunt Lucia, in horror.

"Most likely he is by this time. He was engaged then. Dear Aunt Lucia, if you love me, don't ask me about it any more. I can't bear it. I was a most dreadful idiot, and now I want to forget it all."

"Of course; that is the only thing to do," said her aunt hastily. "Only do just have mercy upon me, and tell me his name."



“Gérard de Maulévrier.”

“That Frenchman!” cried Aunt Lucia. “Didn’t I say so! Didn’t I hate your going to France!” and she was obliged to calm herself with a few turns about the room. “Beast!” she said, with immense energy; the word sounded comical from her refined lips.

“No, I can’t let you say that,” said Pauline. “It was as much my fault as his.”

It was impossible to check or withstand Aunt Lucia’s eager interest, or not to answer her questions and her hasty inferences. Pauline soon found herself telling the whole story so quietly that she was astonished at herself, mentioning names and places and things that she had thought she could never bear to speak of again. Aunt Lucia was full of sympathy; she caressed the child a great deal, and said a great many silly things.

“Now you know all, and I must go to bed,” said Pauline at last, looking up and smiling through tears. “You will never tell any one, will you?”

Miss Mowbray put her arms round her neck and kissed her affectionately.

“I’m glad he is a Frenchman,” she said, “because I may hate him as much as I please. I do hate him, you know, and I think it is the most ridiculous story I ever heard. Tell any one! *Pas si bête*—to use your favourite language.”

## CHAPTER VIII.

### RESIGNATION.

PAULINE MOWBRAY had been the cause of the first real anger and estrangement between Madame de Maulévrier and her eldest son. After the English people were gone, Gérard had told his mother that it was impossible for him to fulfil the engagement she had made for him with Mademoiselle de Bbye. As no business arrangements had been entered into yet, it was possible to withdraw, and he insisted that it must be done. He would not marry for years, he said—if ever.

Madame de Maulévrier quite refused to take this view of things: she called him a weak-minded fool; she declared that her

wishes and plans should be carried out, and absolutely refused to write to Madame de Brye on the subject. She used all the authority of a French mother, with a resolute will which doubled it. The habit of his life was too strong for Gérard, and his passionate protestings soon died down into a kind of sulky resignation. But he could not so easily forgive his mother, and leaving her in coldness and anger, he went back that same afternoon to the gaieties of Boiscarré.

In the next few days he had a good deal of talk with the royal guest there, who took a fancy to him, for there was something Spanish about Gérard, and the Prince was more intelligent than most of his own usual companions. The end of it was that Gérard, with one or two others of the Boiscarré party, went with the Prince and his suite to Biarritz for two or three weeks,

after which he invited them to pay him a visit in Spain. Thus a month or two went by before Gérard came back to Maulévrier.

Victor and Léon spent part of the time there with their mother, and found life very dismal, for her disagreement with Gérard, whose return she longed for, but would not hasten by a letter, filled her with sternness and gloom. Things were presently brightened for the young men, however, by the arrival of M. de Brye and his family at the Maison Blanche. If Gérard's absence was a little surprise to them, no one seemed to miss him much. Françoise, who ought to have felt it most, was in excellent spirits, and apparently not at all troubled with thoughts of the future. Even Madame de Maulévrier's stiff severity did not damp her enjoyment of the country, and of such society as was to be found there.

The Marquise did not complain of Gérard to her younger sons, who could only guess that she was displeased with him by her seldom or never mentioning his name. The only person to whom she talked freely was her friend the Curé; with him she had long consultations over Gérard's future, and he and she agreed very well on the subject, their views of conscience and duty being the same. The Curé, too, was rather angry with his old favourite, and could not understand this English craze which had taken possession of Gérard: though Madame de Maulévrier did not tell even him all that she had seen and heard, she told him enough to fill him with astonishment, mingled with some contempt and pity, for Gérard had disappointed him. Of course to Gérard's mother, he did not hint at any secret feeling of scorn for the foolish young man;

but it was the keenest touch of pain in the whole matter, though he told himself that he need not have been surprised. Gérard's goodness, the Curé knew very well, had, to that time, been almost unnatural; he had loved him for it, had wondered at it, had never looked on him as a specially strong character.

The Curé was not a man who had trained himself to despise and ignore all human weaknesses; he could love and understand sinners, even when their sins were of a dark colour. What he could not understand was the absurdity, the dishonourableness, as he thought it, the disloyalty, of wishing to give up a suitable engagement so full of advantages for Gérard's family and himself, so dear to his mother's heart, for the pretty fair face of a heretic Englishwoman, who had no money, no prospects, nothing, the Curé thought,

which could make it in any way possible for Gérard to marry her. And the best of it was that Gérard saw this himself; he knew he could not marry Pauline Mowbray; it was not with any idea of marrying her that he wished to free himself from Françoise de Brye; it was simply to please himself, to gain a sort of selfish independence by disappointing everybody, and refusing to think of the interests of his family, of the Royalist cause, of anything but his own obstinate fancy.

The Curé sat in his study and smiled, and thought that the romance in Gérard's character, which he had always regarded with a sort of tenderness, was certainly an unfortunate possession for an eldest son, who had to come forward and live in the world with all its uninteresting duties.

“Good-day, Gérard! I was thinking



of you at that moment," said Monsieur Olivier, turning his head at the well-known footstep, which came along his passage in the quiet afternoon.

"I was not far off, you see," said Gérard, coming in and sitting down with his back to the light, near the open window, screened with reddening leaves.

"I see. When did you arrive?"

"This is my arrival."

"You have not been to the château?"

"No. I sent the carriage on, and walked from the top of the hill. I thought I would pay you a visit in passing. Are you well, monsieur?"

"As well as usual—as well as troublesome thoughts will allow," said the Curé. He smiled a little, and looked keenly and sadly at the young man.

Gérard's eyes were hardly lifted to meet his. Some change had come upon him;

his friend was not sure whether it was an improvement. He looked remarkably handsome and distinguished, more manly than in his old hermit days. The dreamy sweetness of his expression seemed to have departed, making room for a sort of proud reserve that was almost sullenness. There was much more spirit and fire in his glance, and yet it was a dark fire which made the Curé reflect a little satirically that Gérard always managed to look like the hero of a tragedy, either good or bad. But, however he looked, his old friend was glad to see him again, and leaned back with a smile on his face, quietly watching him.

“Well, I suppose you have brought me some news,” he said, after a pause. “You have been in a centre of politics. Tell me about your Prince, and his father, and our chances in Spain. Have

you come back more loyal than ever, or is it all vanity and vexation of spirit?"

"I hate politics," said Gérard, sighing and shrugging his shoulders. "I rather think you are the happiest man, do you know. One day, perhaps, one feels enthusiastic, and ready to fight, and so on; but then, as one is not expected to fight and only to make plots, and to kill time, in any way that comes uppermost, the worse and more stupid the better, why, one feels as if La Trappe would be the best place after all. At the same time, the Prince is a good fellow, if he was not such a Spaniard—bigoted, obtuse—but that is more the fault of his education. Yes, I was happy with him sometimes, but not always. It is vanity, as you say—emptiness, bah! cloth of gold spread over a swamp; but I have

come to the conclusion that all life is the same, dear monsieur."

"It seems that it is a pity you went to Spain," said the Curé.

"No; I am glad I went. I like to get a thorough sight of things, even if they are disappointing," said Gérard.

"And I, sitting here at home, like to see with your eyes," said the Curé. "So begin, my friend, and tell me your adventures, unless you are in a hurry to go home."

"My mother will not expect me yet," replied Gérard; and he began, and went on talking, perhaps, for an hour, the Curé asking many questions. Certainly, no one who listened to these two would have thought that one of them hated politics, or that their cause seemed to them in any way vanity and vexation.

Gérard by this time was growing

gentler and more cheerful. The Curé, who had trained him from his boyhood, had a great influence over him, and always a soothing and pleasant one. This did not fail now; yet the old tutor could not deceive himself as to the change in his pupil. The world had laid her hand on Gérard, and, though he did not love her, she had hardened him; he had lost faith and hope; she had breathed on his illusions, and they were withered. Victor would find him a more congenial companion now. He had certainly suffered, and the suffering had done him more harm than good. One consequence of this hardening, however, ought to have pleased Monsieur Olivier, who had disapproved so highly of Gérard's romance.

"Your mother will be glad to see you," he said, when the history seemed

to have come to an end. "She has Victor and Léon at home with her, yet when you are away she is lonely."

"She has not written to me," said Gérard, his face clouding over.

"That was your fault, my friend. She was right and you were wrong."

"As La Trappe does not seem possible, I suppose she will be satisfied," said Gérard.

At the same moment they heard through the open door a footstep coming up the garden-path between the flowers—late roses, carnations, lilies—and the Curé could only glance his disapproval of the bitterness with which this was said, for there was a sharp rap on the outer door, and the Marquise's voice said loudly,

"Monsieur le Curé, have you seen anything of Gérard?"

“Go and meet her,” said M. Olivier ; and Gérard, with his instinct of obedience, got up and went.

Nobody but the white cat, who was sitting on the step, saw that meeting under the vine arches which made Madame de Maulévrier so happy. She forgot her sternness, she forgot that she had been angry with Gérard, when he came to meet her along the little blue passage ; and they kissed each other as if it was an ordinary good-morning of days long ago, before anything had happened to disturb their peaceful relations. Something in Gérard’s manner told Madame de Maulévrier that he had come back meaning to be good to her, to carry out her wishes ; and she at once made up her mind that she would not reproach him for his long absence, which, after all, had been spent in a

most loyal and approved fashion. Looking up at Gérard, her face was as happy as a girl's. Poor Victor and Léon had never seen such smiles, such softness; they would not have known their mother.

"I thought I should find you here," she said; and she held him by the arm, that he might not escape her again, while she called out, "Monsieur le Curé, have you done with Gérard? It is my turn now. I am going to take him home."

Thus summoned, the Curé came out and joined them. He was a little amused and a little touched by her perfect satisfaction, and thought to himself how easy it was to make a woman happy.

"Only give her the creature she loves best, however discontented and half-



hearted he may be. She loves him all the more for having made her angry, and disappointed her. Now she will be more wrapped up in Gérard than ever."

But to her he only remarked how well Gérard was looking, and that he had had a fine education in politics, and had seen the world to great advantage.

"But he does not wish to leave Maulévrier for it—do you, Gérard?" said the Marquise.

"No," said Gérard; "it would certainly be no improvement. The world and the people in it are duller than Maulévrier."

As he and his mother walked away through the village, and up the avenue, they talked at first unceasingly. He answered her questions about the Prince and his family, and asked questions himself about his brothers, to which

she replied rather carelessly. Then, as they came near the château, there was a pause, which he broke by asking whether Monsieur and Madame de Brye were at the Maison Blanche.

“They have been there three weeks. I have seen them constantly. And”—after a moment’s hesitation she went on—“this marriage, Gérard; let us understand each other. Are you prepared—have you thought any more about it? I believe most people think Mademoiselle de Brye charming.”

“No doubt she is charming,” said Gérard, calmly. “I thought it was already arranged; we understood each other before I left home. I have not changed my mind since.”

“Neither have I,” said the Marquise. “Well, she is a fortunate girl, and I think she is clever enough to know it.

I shall not love her, for the young girls of the present day are not lovable; but that will not matter to her at all—in fact, she will never find it out, for your wife must, of course, be my daughter. If she charms you, nothing more is necessary.”

“She is charming,” Gérard repeated rather absently.

It was no use beginning the old arguments over again. If fate would have it, if that poor little Françoise was to belong to him, and he to her, they certainly might as well make the best of it. Of course, he did not love her, any more than his mother did; but after all, nearly every marriage was of the same kind; there would be plenty of money, and they need not be always together. None of the husbands and wives he had met lately cared for each

other in the least, and yet their lives seemed to go on very agreeably.

Gérard was trying hard to forget Pauline, to laugh at that foolish passion which had conquered him so completely, and which never, he knew very well, could have ended otherwise than as it did. He was trying hard and honestly, but for the credit of man's constancy one is glad to say that he was still far from success.

"I hope you will arrange it all with Madame de Brye as quickly as you can," he said to his mother, as they walked up under the trees. "The marriage had better be soon—in a few weeks, if you like."

"Very well, we will see," said Madame de Maulévrier, a little surprised. "You are impatient; but Mademoiselle Françoise ought to be flattered. I don't

know whether her father and mother will wish to lose her so soon."

"Just as they please," said Gérard. "Only the thing need not be put off long."

"Ah, old Gérard! how are you?" cried Léon's cheerful voice from a window.

"Yes, my son, go and talk to your brothers," said Madame de Maulévrier. "Come to me presently in my room. You have made me very happy."

Gérard was glad that she was happy. He certainly was not; but he had lately been learning fine lessons of philosophy and manners—for instance, how to smile when you have the heartache—and Victor and Léon were surprised and glad to find that Gérard's visit to Spain had made a man of him.

## CHAPTER IX.

### FISHING.

THE Maison Blanche, so silent and lonely earlier in the summer, when Gérard had walked there with Pauline and Mr. Mowbray, had a very different aspect now. The court was full of flowers; so was the gay little shining salon, which opened straight on the high paved walk under the windows. Servants and dogs and horses kept the place alive with noise. Through the pleasant sunny days this picnic-life in the woods went on merrily, untroubled by ghosts or storms. A wet day, which kept the inhabitants indoors; a windy night, howling in the crests of the pines

that watched over the ruined walls of the old château, might make Madame de Brye exclaim that such weather in the country was unbearable, and that it was time to go back to Tourlyon ; but the wet day would end with a glorious red sunset, and the wind would fall in the early morning, so that she woke up to a world of quiet sunshine, and she was contented again ; and the picnic-life went on.

At this time of the year the few scattered people who lived in that country were all at home. September had begun, and there were constant shooting-parties, followed by dinner-parties, small or large. Sometimes an enterprising lady would get up some theatricals, with a dance after them. At nearly all the châteaux people from Paris were staying, who added very

much to the numbers and liveliness of the society. Madame de Maulévrier went to none of these entertainments, and gave none herself—at least, while Gérard was away; but Madame de Brye found them delightful; and the dinners in her own tiny rooms, with coffee and talk outside the windows afterwards, were thought very agreeable by every one who came to them. There had always been a certain fascination about the Maison Blanche, partly from the strange old stories connected with it. The Brye family was one of the oldest in the province; the present Comte was very popular, and it had leaked out that his only child was likely to marry the Marquis de Maulévrier.

As to the Maulévriers, they were not loved. Gérard and his mother, avoiding their neighbours, were, of course, dis-



liked by them. People hoped that Gérard's marriage would improve him, and said it was a pity that Maulévrier was not to belong to one of his brothers. Victor, they said, had very good manners, and Léon and Jules, "les petits," were charming boys; it was a wonder that any one so absolutely terrible as Madame de Maulévrier could have sons like them.

Françoise and her mother, when they were alone, studied fashion-books, and did a good deal of needlework. Françoise also played a variety of jerky little tunes on the pianoforte, or put on a pinafore and drew flowers from Nature in water-colour. She had some taste, but had not been well taught, and her flowers were very artificial; however, she had many compliments, and Madame de Brye was not sure that she did not draw rather too well for an amateur. When

they were tired of being indoors, and were not going to drive anywhere, these ladies went out into a meadow near the house, and caught small fishes in a brook that ran between two rows of trees there.

Victor de Maulévrier came alone one afternoon to the Maison Blanche, and hearing that M. de Brye was out with his gun, and that the ladies were fishing, followed them into the meadow. They were sitting in a shady place, side by side on camp-stools. Madame de Brye having stuck her rod into the root of a tree, was working, with one eye on the water, while Françoise fished diligently. Now and then they talked a little, and it seemed as if they had disagreed about something, for Françoise looked rather flushed and sulky; and as Victor approached softly over the grass, he heard

the words, "If he does not come," in a decidedly angry tone. But she saw or heard that he was there, and she broke off suddenly without looking round. Victor did not think that he was himself the object of her indignation.

"You, Monsieur Victor!" said Madame de Brye, who was always very friendly to him. "Delighted to see you; but I thought it must be your brother. Is it true that he has come home?"

"Yes, madame," said Victor. "Gérard arrived yesterday."

He looked at Françoise, but she would hardly look at him. These weeks had established him and Léon on a very intimate footing with their future connections, scarcely a day having passed without their meeting; and though nobody, perhaps, perceived it but them-

selves, he and Françoise were the two who really understood each other. Not that they had ever talked to each other much; but often, when other people were talking, their eyes would meet and smile; and Victor, though by no means the most silent man in the room, was the one who watched Françoise and knew her wishes, who managed that she should be amused, who kept bores away from her, and took every opportunity of finding himself near enough to speak to her. This little game had begun at Tourlyon, and was carried on even more successfully in the country; yet in words, they had never exchanged anything but utter commonplaces; and Madame de Brye was only conscious of Victor's politeness to herself, and said to every one that he was the pleasantest young man she knew.

On this occasion, after a quick glance at her daughter, she asked no more questions about Gérard, but talked to Victor about fishing. It was not a favourite amusement of his, but he knew something about everything, and had his own opinion on the best way of catching minnows. It was cool and pleasant there in the shady meadow, for the sun was hot that afternoon. He sat down at the foot of a tree, which rustled softly above his head; the flowing stream made a refreshing little sound; and Victor, an over-civilised man, without the smallest feeling for Nature, was yet conscious of a touch of Arcadian sentiment, an agreeable melancholy.

He had enjoyed the last few weeks, he hardly knew why. Most men would have been bored by such a sylvan existence. It had come to an end, and he

was a little sorry, though he had never expected any other end but Gérard's triumphant return. He sat there talking to Madame de Brye, and looking under his eyelids at Françoise, who was evidently out of humour, and went on fishing gravely from her camp-stool.

Victor talked to Madame de Brye about Paris, and allowed himself to speak of provincial life rather scornfully. He did not mind startling this good woman by the things he said; and a smile and a shrug, on questions of politics or religion, had conveyed to her mind vague ideas of freethinking on those subjects, which she had not communicated to any one. Gérard, no doubt, was the best of the brothers in principle. Madame de Brye was deeply sorry in her heart that he was the least agreeable; and if any one had spoken ill of Victor in her presence, she

certainly, good Catholic as she was, would have defended him.

All this Victor knew very well. He divined, as he sat there by the stream, that these ladies were slightly offended with Gérard, both for his long absence in Spain, and for his not coming immediately to the Maison Blanche on his return. Victor, who had a pretty fair idea of the state of the case all through, was not surprised at Gérard, and only laughed at the airs of this young Fortunatus, who seemed to have everything laid at his feet, waiting on his pleasure. Victor never believed for a moment that Gérard really disliked the prospect before him: suspecting both from his mother's manner and Gérard's, that the English infatuation had gone farther than he actually knew, he yet felt sure that it was only a passing fancy after all; or, at

any rate, nothing that was likely to interfere with a man's serious future.

And the philosophical Victor, who had covertly watched Françoise de Brye till he knew every shade in her face and every movement of her eyelashes, did not feel himself exactly injured by Gérard's privileges. He was loyal to his family; more so, perhaps, than to Church or king; and even now, with a little too much admiration for his brother's intended wife, he would have given in cheerfully to the arrangement which made it possible for Gérard to marry her. He certainly did not confess even to himself that he wished it to fall through; and he did not think this the least likely. The marriage was a convenient one for the Bryes, as well as for themselves. They would forgive Gérard, he suspected, more than a little negligence; and he did not think it



necessary to talk about his brother or defend him now that he was, perhaps, slightly out of favour. That would mend itself soon enough, and Victor thought he might as well keep his own popularity.

“And do you think of spending this winter at Tourlyon, madame?” he asked presently.

“One hardly knows yet,” hesitated Madame de Brye. “It depends on—so many things. And where will you be this winter? With your regiment, I suppose. Where is that?”

“Just now in Paris, but we expect to be sent to Africa.”

“Indeed! Shall you enjoy that?”

“Not too much,” said Victor, with a shrug. “The climate, of course, is heavenly, but I don’t care for climates. I would rather be frozen in Paris than bask in sunbeams at Algiers. There is

no place like Paris ; and though you may not agree with me, madame, I think Mademoiselle Françoise does."

Fanni looked round, and nodded her head, with a little smile.

"Yes, I do agree with you," she said.

"Ah, you are both young," said Madame de Brye.

"Pardon, madame ; Paris is the place for all ages. But I need not talk about it, for I know you do not really prefer Tourlyon, though you are good enough to say so. If I could only persuade you to come to Paris this winter ! Mademoiselle, use your influence, join your prayers to mine. But perhaps we ought to begin with M. de Brye. If he votes for Paris, we shall have gained madame."

Françoise looked up at him brightly, but then glanced at her mother, who

was making a doubtful little face. Her discontented look came back at once.

“Ah, no,” she said, softly ; “it is no use talking: it is waste of time building castles in the air. Mamma and papa mean to live and die and be buried at Tourlyon. They seem to think one town is as good as another. Tourlyon, Paris—it is the same thing, except that Tourlyon is a little the gayer, and has the finest cathedral and the best gardens. Yes, you will find that I am right, monsieur.”

“Naughty child!” said Madame de Brye, smiling, but she was really a little shocked. “Well, yes, I agree with you, Monsieur Victor. Paris is very charming; but, as I say, our plans for this winter depend on—many things, as you know already. And after all, if we were to spend it in Paris, it would be without the

pleasure of your society, I suppose. Did not you say something about Algiers?"

"That is uncertain, as far as I am concerned," said Victor. He got up, and stood for a minute or two lingering in the shade. "One is sorry when pleasant things come to an end," he said. "I am going back to Paris, and it has no attractions just now; hot and empty, or crowded with foreigners, who are much worse than nobody. English, Americans—I hardly know which are the most obnoxious."

He talked on, watching Françoise, whose countenance had certainly fallen a little at the mention of his going away.

"Yes, they are all detestable," said Madame de Brye. "Even those people that your brother made acquaintance with. Madame de Maulévrier told me that though she liked them at first, she

changed her mind before they went away. It must really have been a great trial to her, entertaining them at Maulévrier. I thought it an extraordinary thing myself. I was very glad to ask them to dinner, and so on, to oblige your brother ; but I should have been sorry to have them staying in my house. All their ways and ideas are so different from ours, so inferior. I suppose it is the case all through that nation, though they were good-looking people, certainly. What did you say, Monsieur Victor, about going away? My ears deceived me, I hope."

"You are too kind ; but yes, I am afraid I must go. My leave ends in three weeks, and there are various things I want to do before then. I half promised to join some of my friends for a week at Trouville. Now that Gérard is come home they hardly want me so much at Maulévrier."

“Monsieur Gérard is not so like you that one can be a substitute for the other,” said Madame de Brye.

“Ah, madame, your goodness has made this neighbourhood a very different place to me. But as to Gérard, his Spanish visit has enlivened him wonderfully—you will see.”

“On Sunday, perhaps, we may have an opportunity of seeing,” said the Comtesse, rather dryly. “I want you to do me a favour—try and persuade your mother to come with you and your brothers to dine with us on Sunday. You don’t mean that you are going away sooner than that?”

“This was a farewell visit. I thought of going to-morrow,” said Victor, with a little hesitation.

“That is impossible. We must have you on Sunday. And next week M. de

Brye will have a large shooting party, and I know he depends on you as one of the best shots. Surely you cannot care for anything so frivolous and tiresome as Trouville!"

Madame de Brye was quite animated, and Victor was rather pleased by her anxiety to keep him, though he was not sure whether he cared to stay.

"Ah, madame, it is the most dangerous flattery that makes one feel oneself necessary," he said, smiling.

"It is not flattery," said Madame de Brye. "We do not like being bored, and you amuse us. You are quite necessary to our comfort—to Fanni's and mine."

"Mamma, you talk very selfishly," said Fanni, while Victor stood and stroked his black moustache, and looked at her thoughtfully. "I think Trouville is delightful, and I don't wonder that Monsieur

Victor wants to go there. Why should he stay here a day longer than he likes?"

"You see, madame, you are solitary," said Victor.

"Pardon!" said Fanni, with a quick earnest look. "I did not say mamma was solitary; I said she talked selfishly."

Madame de Brye herself hardly understood this little passage, or Victor's pleased look as he made Fanni the slightest bow of acknowledgment.

"I shall, at any rate, hope to be here on Sunday, madame," he said; "and, perhaps for the shooting-party—it is a great temptation. In the mean time I wish you good sport."

As he spoke, Françoise jerked her line out of the water, and threw down the rod on the grass.

"It is too childish," she said, half to herself.



“For my part, I find it amusing,” said Madame de Brye, taking up her own. “One can fish and think.”

Victor had bowed his farewell, and was walking away up the meadow.

“Think! what is there to think about!” said Françoise. “Nothing in the present, and the future certainly is not too attractive. Poor me! And these country amusements are to last for ever!”

She muttered the last words almost too low for her mother to hear them.

“Hush! You chatter so fast that you frighten the fish,” said Madame de Brye. “I am sure I had a bite then—a very obliging fish, after all this conversation. I think, dear child, you must practise a little meditation, and you must really try to improve your manners. Monsieur Victor is a charming young man, and I am sure he wishes to be agreeable to you; but you

were so cold and sulky to-day that he will go home and tell his mother you have a very bad temper."

"Will he, do you think?" said Françoise.

## CHAPTER X.

### TWO DUTIES.

GÉRARD called the next day at the Maison Blanche, but the ladies were out, and he bore his disappointment with a cheerfulness which made Victor—rather to his own disgust—feel angry with him. Gérard repeated to his mother that night, however, that he did not wish for any delay, and that perhaps on Sunday she might find an opportunity of talking to Madame de Brye on the subject. But when Sunday came all plans were upset by a person who would never knowingly have interfered with Gérard's duty. The people were assembled at mass in the village church, a reverent congregation; in the

long front pew sat Madame de Maulévrier and her three sons. Even Victor could not absent himself here, and even he confessed that M. Olivier's clever preaching almost made up for the ugly monotonous singing and harsh voices of the village choir. The day was very warm, and even the incense in the church was overpowered by the strong scent from four great pots of gold-spotted lilies, which the Marquise had sent down to stand by our Lady's altar.

The Curé went up into his pulpit looking very pale, and began to preach with a certain hesitation in his manner, which passed off as he went on, his subject taking possession of him, as it generally did. He preached on the shortness of life, and the utter foolishness of a man who made happiness his chief object in it. He had often spoken on this subject before,

but never with quite so much conviction, such positive uncompromising scorn of "miserable ends that ends with self."

"What does it matter, my dear brothers," said the Curé, "how these selves of ours spend the next few passing years, so that we go through them with our eyes fixed on a point beyond—if there is such a thing as a point in eternity?"

Just as he reached this word he hesitated again, stammered, stretched out his hands, and then sank down on his knees, his head falling forward on the pulpit-desk.

Madame de Maulévrier had been listening devoutly, as she always did, whether the sermon suited her or not. Gérard also had listened with a sort of melancholy interest, for he felt as if his old friend meant the sermon for him. Victor had condescended to listen, for he respected the Curé's intellect more.

than that of most priests, and was even wishing to argue with him, and explain his disagreement, if he could have done it unknown to his mother. Léon only was thinking of something pleasant, far away from Maulévrier, and the Curé's voice did not trouble his happy young consciousness at all. But for all that he was the most awake, the first to know what had happened, and to spring to his feet and dart towards the pulpit when the Curé fell. For a few minutes there was a great confusion in the church, people crowding forward to see what had happened; but Madame de Maulévrier ordered them back. Her sons carried M. Olivier who had fainted, out into the fresh air of the churchyard, and as soon as he was conscious again, and able to stand, helped him home to the Presbytère. He continued very ill all

day; the good fat little doctor hardly knew what to make of this sudden attack, which at this time of the year could not very well have been caused by fasting, and talked dismally to Madame de Maulévrier about heart-disease. In the afternoon the Curé fainted several times. There were, of course, no vespers, and the people stood in the street, and came by ones and twos to the gate to ask for their old friend; they were all fond of M. Olivier, who was a lovable person, and knew how to manage them.

Gérard stayed with him all day, and his mother came down more than once from the château. As she walked home, late in the afternoon, she met her second son in the avenue.

“How did you find M. le Curé?” said Victor, in his quiet way, turning to walk with her.

"I think he is very ill," said Madame de Maulévrier. "That little Caton is as stupid and ignorant as an owl. If he is not better to-morrow I shall send to Tourlyon for Dr. Lebas. Not that I believe in doctors; but when you don't know what is the matter, they may be of use in finding out."

"Very true," said Victor, smiling. "And our good Gérard is still acting nurse?"

"Gérard will not leave him," said Madame de Maulévrier. "He speaks to no one else. When the doctor asks him a question, he looks at Gérard, and answers him."

"Odd!" said Victor. "But I suppose—Gérard must leave him by and by. He has not forgotten that we dine at the Maison Blanche."

"But I assure you that he has forgotten all about it!" said Madame de



Maulévrier, stopping short, startled, and looking at him. "So had I, to say the truth; this poor Curé's illness had driven all such things out of my head. How tiresome! But we promised, and of course, we must go—all but Gérard. I wish these good stupid people would let us alone."

Victor shrugged his shoulders. "All but Gérard, *ma mère!*" he repeated, incredulously.

"Certainly. I suppose two young men will be enough for them."

"Madame de Brye would dispense with Léon and myself, if the choice lay between us and Gérard."

"Of course she would—naturally. But there happens to be no choice in the matter, so she must content herself."

"It is very unfortunate," said Victor, gravely.

“Pardon?”

He looked at her inquiringly.

“I don’t see the misfortune—and if it was, how would it matter to you? The Bryes are not royalty, that one should neglect all ones duties for them. They ought to understand, and they will when I tell them.”

“Very likely,” said Victor, “Still it is unfortunate that Gérard has not seen them yet. After being away for so long, if he stays at home to-day it will look like indifference; and I think Madame de Brye will be surprised.”

“You are very considerate for Madame de Brye. However, Gérard is not indifferent. He is in a hurry on the contrary. He wishes me to arrange the whole thing as soon as possible.”

“Really!” said Victor.

“Yes; his heart is more in it than

you think," said Madame de Maulévrier, in a decided manner. "He told me the other day that the girl was charming. I don't agree with him; but, of course, I am glad he thinks so."

"He hardly behaves as if he thought so," said Victor, half aside.

"Mon Dieu, Victor, one would think you were Madame de Brye's son, not mine; you are so jealous for these people's fancies and dignities. Don't alarm yourself, pray; there is no danger of the thing falling through; the Bryes are bent upon it as much as we are I suppose."

Victor walked beside her in silence for a minute or two, hardly understanding his own feelings; he was yet half afraid of betraying them. What harm, indeed, could it do him if his brother's marriage fell through after all? Ought he not

to be rather glad than sorry? And yet he was nervously anxious that Gérard should not offend these people.

"You are sure that Gérard has forgotten the dinner?" he said presently.

"I believe so. At least, I am sure that he does not mean to go to it."

"I may as well go down and remind him?"

"Do as you please; it will make no difference," replied the most plainspoken woman in France.

Gérard came out to speak to his brother, and they took one or two turns up and down the paved walk in the garden. He was quite aware of the engagement, and had only forgotten to ask his mother to make his excuses to Madame de Brye. And this had not troubled him much; for he felt sure she would see things as he did, and make them of her own accord.

"Ah! and you think you are right, my dear?" said Victor, with an air of deliberation.

"Right? What else could I do?" said Gérard.

"Well, let us hope that they will understand, and admire your self-denial."

"It is not self-denial," said Gérard, with the old dreamy frankness that always amused his brother so thoroughly.

This time, however, Victor's smile was of the slightest, and he said, with a little shrug,

"Then you are mistaken—it must be. At least, we must all think that it is." Gérard laughed, and did not answer instantly.

"You are right, of course," he said. "Well, my sentiments are in your hands. Make them out as fine as you like. One thing is certain—I shall not leave Monsieur le Curé this evening."

“Does it even strike you that you are a little inconsistent?” said Victor, thoughtfully.

“How?”

“Well, it is an awkward subject, and no business of mine.”

“Say what you please,” said Gérard; and he did not at all intimate, as his mother had done, that Victor’s sayings would make no difference.

“You seem to me to be holding back and pressing on at the same time. My mother tells me that you want things arranged as soon as possible, and that you are anything but indifferent to—to—”

“Go on. I understand.”

“Does it strike you that they will have to take all that on trust from my mother? Here you have been at home several days without seeing them.”

“I went to see them, and they were out.”

“Well, yes ; you did the barest civility. Now you snatch at the first excuse to stay away. You won’t suspect me of wishing you ill. And it is not only for your own sake that I say all this, Gérard.”

“Don’t trouble yourself; it will all come right by and by,” said Gérard.

“I am sorry for you both,” said Victor, with strange earnestness. “If I understand her character at all, she is not a person to be satisfied with nothing. Let me say that she deserves more than to be accepted with resignation.”

“It is not my doing,” said Gérard, almost angrily. “I said all I could, and now they all know that they can do what they like with me; the sooner the better, as I have told my mother. My staying here this evening will affect nobody.”

“Take my advice, and come with us,” said Victor. “Old Bertha and Caton will take very good care of your patient.”

“No,” said Gérard, looking up at the low window of the Curé’s room, where the white curtain fluttered a little, as if it was making signals to him.

“There is *no* attraction for you at the Maison Blanche, then?” said Victor.

“I am growing old, my dear fellow,” said Gérard, smiling rather sadly. “I leave those sentiments to boys like you.”

“And to add to your faults you are not a patriot,” said Victor, lightly.

He was quite aware of the quick flush of colour that answered in Gérard’s face to this hint of his. It was the only answer he had, for Gérard walked straight back into the house without



another word. Victor smiled to himself, and pulled and twirled his moustache a good deal, as he went back to the château.

## CHAPTER XI.

### STARLIGHT.

VICTOR was right, and all the good breeding that the Comtesse de Brye possessed was hardly enough to hide her astonishment at Gérard's desertion. Of course she accepted his mother's excuses, but very stiffly, and, indeed, they sounded weak enough; she did not make any remark upon them, but neither did she ask any questions, or show the least interest in the Curé of Maulévrier and his sudden illness. Her manner had no effect on the Marquise, quite secure in her own dignity and Gérard's; coldness and lifting of eyebrows were lost upon her. M. de Brye was just as cordial as

ever, and Françoise showed neither surprise nor disappointment.

In the evening, when the ladies were alone, Madame de Maulévrier asked her hostess if they could have a little private talk together.

“Certainly,” said the Comtesse. “Françoise, my child, run away for a few minutes; go and take a little turn in the court; but first put on a shawl.”

“Yes, mamma,” said Françoise, obediently.

She went out, and walked up and down the pavement under the windows, upon which all the rooms opened. No blinds were down, and, glancing in as she passed, she could see her mother and the Marquise sitting together on a sofa at the further end of the salon, talking gravely and mysteriously in low voices. She looked away, turning her sad little

face towards the other side of the court, where the servants' lights were moving about behind the trees. Then for a moment she glanced up at the sky, dark and thickly set with stars. No help there for a puzzled young soul; but Françoise would not have dreamed of expecting it. As she walked slowly along, now looking down with troubled eyes at the pavement, thinking of something very foolish, a little secret which no one must ever know, but which seemed, even to a nature like hers, horribly hard and sad, one of the other windows opened, and a dark figure stepped out into the starlight. This was the smoking-room, and Françoise, hearing voices there, was just turning back before she reached it.

“ Ah, Monsieur Victor ! ” she said, with a little start ; but he could hardly

even be aware of that in the darkness.

"It is not Victor, mademoiselle, it is Léon," said a pleasant young voice in answer. "Are you taking a little walk? How charming 'it is out here?'"

"Rather cold, I think," said Françoise, with a slight shiver in spite of her shawl.

"Do you find it so? I don't."

She had turned to walk back, and he paced slowly beside her towards the salon. His store of small talk was not large, and her manner, after the first moment, had become a little snappish. He felt that she did not care for his company, but hardly knew how to relieve her of it. When they had gone a few yards she stood still, and Léon, of course, also stopped.

"Your poor Curé is dying, then!" she said rather abruptly.

“But—no, certainly I hope not; he is much better.”

“Indeed!” said Françoise, in a tone which reminded Léon that it would not do to make too light of the Curé’s illness.

He was not at all diplomatic, but he had heard his mother and Victor talking about it in the carriage, and had been inclined to agree with his mother, and to think that no one could reasonably be offended at Gérard’s staying with his sick friend. Victor’s anxiety struck him as rather queer. He had, however, forgotten all about it when they arrived at the Maison Blanche, and had not thought of Gérard any more. Now it seemed that Françoise really was a little angry at heart. He immediately went on to give her an account of the Curé’s seizure in church that morning.

"And so, you [see, Gérard did not like to leave him," he ended, in an explanatory tone.

"He is very good," said Françoise.

"He is a kind old fellow," said Léon not at all approving of the way in which she said this. "I think it was good of him to stay with Monsieur le Curé, though you are angry with him for it. I could not have done it myself."

There was something very charming in this young man's manner to Françoise. With its gentle boyishness there was a pretty air of affectionate possession and a frankness which was quite brotherly. If all things had gone right with Françoise she ought to have preferred Léon many times to Victor.

"I did not say I was angry, Monsieur Léon," said Françoise, quietly.

"But you are."

“No, I am not; as to that, nobody would care if I was, except, perhaps—”

“Yes, you might except one or two people. It never struck me that you would be angry,” he went on after a moment. “Victor was afraid you would; but my mother did not think so, nor did I.”

“Monsieur Victor was the wisest of you, it seems,” said Françoise; and then she perceived that she was contradicting herself, and laughed a little.

“You think Gérard was wrong then?” persevered the candid Léon.

“What does it matter? I think people should keep their engagements; and I have lived long enough to make one grand discovery,” she said, lowering her voice: “one may quite depend on people for always doing—what they like.”

“Ah, pardon, Gérard is not that sort of man at all,” exclaimed Léon.



“Are you standing up for Gérard?” said Victor’s voice suddenly out of the darkness. “Yes, Mademoiselle Fanni, he has fewer faults than most of us, and a fairly steady brain, except when it is carried away by English lunatics, or Spanish princes, or sick priests.”

“How wicked!” said Françoise under her breath; and she left them, turning away and hurrying back to the salon; perhaps she heard her mother coming to the window to look for her.

“Pauvre petite!” said Victor, softly.

Léon made a little exclamation. He had been standing near enough to Fanni this time to be aware of her sudden start, and almost cry, when his brother came up so quietly.

“Mon Dieu, Victor!” he muttered, “what a pity it is not you!”

“What a pity the stars don’t grow

down here!" said Victor, with a slight laugh, and he walked on to the salon.

Léon took one or two turns on the pavement, to get used to this new light on things, before he followed him. It seemed that everything was going wrong, and the world was topsy-turvy—and what could he do but look on, and be sorry for the people in it!

Madame de Maulévrier's coolness and determination, however, carried Gérard's affairs safe past this dangerous point. She took it so entirely for granted, in such a quiet convincing way, that his wishes and intentions were quite right and unchanged, that Madame de Brye was almost obliged to share in these convictions, and to give up once for all the idea of being angry with him. She had begun to remind herself and her husband that a young heiress like Fran-

çoise would, with the smallest sign of encouragement, have plenty of proposals, and from men who, in a money point of view at least, were better parties than the Marquis de Maulévrier; she had even gone so far as to mention one or two likely names to Monsieur de Brye. He, excellent man, was much more ready to make allowances for Gérard; he laughed a little at her doubts, and counted up the advantages of the Maulévrier marriage, though he went so far as to say that he wished Providence had arranged for Victor to be the eldest son, or at any rate his mother's favourite. However, Madame de Maulévrier, who had great influence when she chose to use it, the influence of a strong determined mind over weaker and more changeable ones, succeeded that Sunday evening in reassuring Madame

de Brye, who now perceived that things must take their appointed course. As she had never shown any doubts to Françoise, no change of tone was necessary with her. Her father and mother, whom she knew loved her, were doing their best for her, and she had only to leave her fate in their hands, which to all appearance she did very quietly.

The Curé got better, Gérard came constantly to the Maison Blanche, and it was almost arranged that the marriage should take place at Tourlyon in November. Before then, Madame de Brye intended to spend a few weeks in Paris among the shops. She was now quite happy about the marriage, and found Madame de Maulévrier an amiable neighbour; they had almost daily meetings and consultations about the future arrangements of the young people.

These two were now thrown together as much as in those first days at Tourlyon, early in the summer; but they were both changed, and any disinterested friend who knew them well, seeing them now, would have said that they had even less chance of happiness than before. In those days Gérard had been perfectly sincere; he had been really a little attracted by his intended wife; had watched and studied her with an interest which was real, though anxious and sad; had been honestly eager, at first, that he and Fanni should know and like each other better. Françoise too had admired him, and had felt that there was something fine in his character, to which she need not be afraid to trust herself, though she guessed rightly enough that there were many subjects on which they would never

agree. Then Pauline Mowbray came to Tourlyon.

Now, when the summer and its excitements were over, and Gérard found himself with Françoise again he was much more demonstrative than in those earlier days. He laughed and talked, so that the Comte and Comtesse thought his manners amazingly improved; he paid Françoise every sort of attention; she could not complain now that her lover was dreamy or indifferent, for he was full of life and energy, and only seemed restlessly eager for the time to pass, and the dark days of November to come on. He would be with them in Paris in October; Françoise heard no more of his hatred of Paris; on the contrary, it seemed now, when he talked of it, what Françoise herself thought it, the centre of the earth. Gérard filled his

place very well indeed in these days; he was a man of the world, a very pleasant fellow—but he was not Gérard. His mother and the Curé knew that, if no one else did. Madame de Maulévrier tried not to notice or understand the change at all. M. Olivier felt both sad and amused at it.

The change in Françoise was not, perhaps, so evident, because any feeling she had was never shown much. But it would not have been hard to discover that any fancy she had had for Gérard, any interest she had taken in him and in the future, was gone and faded now. She was cold and indifferent; she did not pretend to be pleased when he came; in fact, she seemed to be the one person at the Maison Blanche to whom his comings and goings made no difference. But if this state of things did not trouble him,

of course it was not of much concern to anybody else ; and Françoise satisfied her mother by showing some interest in her trousseau, which occupied all Madame de Brye's most serious thoughts in these days.

So, through the last three weeks of Victor's leave, the stream of time ran on to its next waterfall.



## CHAPTER XII.

### QUESTION.

VICTOR had silently given up his plan of going to Trouville, and any other lively ways of spending the last weeks of his leave. He had not in fact mentioned these ideas to any one but the Comtesse de Brye and her daughter, and their remonstrances, spoken or silent, seemed to have fixed him at Maulévrier. He was as philosophical as usual, and talked over Gérard's plans with him in a brotherly spirit: one would have said that Victor regarded the course of events with satisfaction.

Monsieur de Brye came once or twice to shoot with the young men at Maulé-

vrier: he, his wife, and Françoise drove over to breakfast, and stayed to dine in the evening. The two mothers did not find the afternoon at all too long, spent in discussing the prospects of their children. Madame de Brye would have liked to inspect every room in the château, to take an inventory of its contents, and count up necessary improvements; but she found Madame de Maulévrier, though charming, a little difficult on these points. Gérard's mother felt that she was doing her best for him in entertaining these women, neither of whom she liked in her heart. A strong sense of duty led her a long way; but she could not be expected to see that the old furniture, which had satisfied her young ideal, wanted any replacing for Gérard's bride. Besides, there was no money to spare, and so necessity, as it often does, allied itself

with pride, to make the Marquise look round on her faded walls complacently. The Bryes of course were richer than themselves; but that, in her view, was a mere matter of chance, and in everything else she had the conviction that the girl was raising herself by marrying Gérard.

The girl herself was provokingly silent and cold. She sat for hours beside her mother without any sign of being tired or discontented, till sometimes, as if she had been a child of six, the Comtesse would say, "Go and amuse yourself, Françoise. Take a little walk, look at the pictures in the other rooms. It is not good for you to sit still all day, petite."

One day Madame de Maulévrier joined in rather earnestly, and Françoise for once left them unwillingly, for she was interested in what they were saying. Her mother, emboldened by the Marquise's

graciousness, had been asking some questions about the Mowbrays. She wanted to compare notes with her friend about them; and their adventures at Maulévrier, their visit to Boiscarré, all the fuss that had been made with them, and finally their sudden departure, were subjects on which she was rather curious. Had dear Madame de Maulévrier heard from them since they went back to England?

The Marquise answered a little shortly at first. Yes, she had one letter from Madame Mowbray; she was in distress; they had lost a great deal of money, and Mademoiselle Pauline was very ill.

“Poor Pauline! I liked her; she was so pretty,” exclaimed Françoise. “Have you heard again, madame?”

Madame de Maulévrier looked up rather oddly at the girl.

“No,” she answered. “Did you like her, my dear Françoise? Very amiable of you. Well, so did I at first, perhaps because she was pretty, as you say; but I found out my mistake afterwards. The girl’s character was odious, and she had been abominably brought up.”

“Gérard liked them all very much. Do you remember, mamma, at Tourlyon, how anxious he was that we should know them?” said Françoise, in a lower tone, opening her large eyes wide.

Madame de Maulévrier looked at her again sharply. Was she innocent, or was she trying to find out something? It was a new thing to hear her quote Gérard or refer to him.

“Gérard did like them,” said she; “but he made a very great mistake. So did I—I acknowledge it.”

“Gérard is so amiable and unsus-  
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picious," said Madame de Brye. "I never feel inclined to like foreigners, for my part. But how was it that you found them out, dear madame, if one might ask?"

Madame de Maulévrier received this question at first in perfect silence. In another moment she would have flatly declined to answer it; but Madame de Brye looked at her, guessed something suddenly, and told Françoise to go out of the room. The girl got up slowly, looking from one to the other, with as much surprise and feeling as her small face ever showed now.

"Where am I to go?" she said.

"Oblige me, my child," said Madame de Maulévrier, with grave dignity. "Go into the library, and find that book of *Chansons Historiques* that your father asked for at breakfast. I think it is

somewhere near the window at the end."

Françoise went away without another word, and Madame de Maulévrier then proceeded to answer her mother's question. She would have been very much surprised to hear that she did this untruthfully; and, in fact, her own impression of the state of things had been very much what she now tried to give to Madame de Brie.

The Comtesse, as well as her daughter, had been aware of Gérard's admiration for the English girl, but she had always made light of it to Françoise, and she thought it was not a bad thing to talk of those people openly, now that the marriage was settled and so near. She thought mysteries were foolish things, and she also liked to satisfy her own curiosity, though hardly expecting to hear much from Madame de Maulévrier. She

was a little startled by Françoise's frank expression of liking for Pauline Mowbray, and wondered too for a moment what the child meant by it; but she wondered a great deal more what Madame de Maulévrier meant by her strange hesitation now, her acquiescence in sending Fanni out of the room. Had there really been anything serious between Gérard and Miss Mowbray, and was this after all the explanation of his backwardness?

Madame de Brye did not imagine that anything of the kind would or could make a difference *now*, but she thought she had a right to know the truth about it.

Madame de Maulévrier felt that it was an awkward subject, but her one idea was to place Gérard above all blame. She saw that these people suspected something; she despised them for it; and



now she herself found it almost impossible to believe that that scene, which had filled her with such anger and scorn, had ever really taken place at all. Gérard was mad just then, she told herself. He was not, and never should be, responsible for that moment's madness, which might have ruined his prospects for ever. The girl was to blame, and nobody else, Madame de Maulévrier assured herself. Her just mind lost its balance when her dearest was concerned, and showed her a weak woman after all.

“There can be no reason to explain these things to a girl like our dear Françoise,” she said to Madame de Brie. “She has no idea what these English are capable of—nor had I till the other day. Gérard is poetical, fanciful. He admired Mademoiselle Mowbray's looks; and she certainly was a pretty girl. Then there

was the amusement of her being English, and there was the link of her father's old acquaintance with M. de Maulévrier."

"Ah, ah! We quite understood all that," nodded Madame de Brye. "That was nobody's fault; it was all very natural. But you had some other reason—something happened?"

Every line in Madame de Brye's face and figure expressed the most eager curiosity. The Marquise felt it, though she did not look at her, and knew that it must somehow be satisfied.

She wished she had turned the matter off lightly at first, when Françoise was in the room; but it was too late now.

"I made a discovery," she said. "I suppose there is some excuse for people who have been brought up without any sense of propriety; but I found that Mademoiselle Mowbray had taken Gérard's

politeness for more than—that she was very sentimental—in short, madame, that she was a terrible coquette, in spite of her fair innocent face. And the best of it was—or rather the worst of it—she knew all the time that his marriage was arranged, so that she did her best to make a traitor of him.”

The Marquise ended with a short laugh, which Madame de Brye echoed cheerfully.

“Indeed, as you say, these English are capable of anything. But how did she hear of the engagement, I wonder? We had only mentioned it to our most intimate friends.”

“Heaven knows,” said the Marquise, shrugging her shoulders. “I only know that I was thankful when they went back to their own country.”

While this explanation was going on,

Françoise had walked slowly away, across the great stone hall and through the ante-room into the library. She made no attempt to find any book; she had forgotten all that; she strayed down the room like a creature in a dream.

A flood of light poured in through the great window at the end, and her shadow trembled on the polished floor; the painted ceiling and the tall book-cases, dark and gloomy, seemed as if they would close down upon her as she went slowly on into the light of the window. There she stood at the end of the sofa, just where another girl had stood with a much sadder heart than hers. She looked very pale and small, oppressed with a heavy load of loneliness. Maulévrier was always a little dreadful to her, in its stern cold grandeur; lately, perhaps, things had improved—

outwardly, at least; Victor and Léon had made the place endurable, and Gérard too had changed almost provokingly. If he was always cheerful and polite, it might be possible to live, though she knew that she would never be contented. But she had certainly made up her mind; and now came a crowd of new suspicions to overturn everything. What was it about this English girl? Something more, evidently, than she and her mother had thought—something which they did not intend her to know.

“But I will know!” said Fanni to herself.

She stood in the window, and looked with unseeing eyes at Pauline’s favourite view. Marie Mingot crossed the park in the distance, walking upright and cheerful under a load of baskets, and leading her little Jeannette by the hand.

Then came two figures with guns, who left the path and were lost in one of the alleys of fading limes. Presently they appeared again under the trees, in full sight of the window; they were Gérard and Victor, with game-bags hanging from their shoulders and a dog following them. Gérard was walking with his eyes on the ground. Victor only looked up, and saw that somebody was standing in the end window of the library; he took off his hat and glanced back once or twice as he walked on with his brother, but he did not point out Fanni to him.

She now remembered, with something very like a shiver, one of her reasons for being dismal that day. Her friend Victor was going away; he was to sleep that night at Tourlyon, leaving home late in the afternoon; the next morning

he was going on to Paris. A most desolate and unreasonable feeling had come over Fanni when she first heard this news. She knew very well that Victor had stayed on here to the end of his leave simply because she wished it. She had been conscious for some time of the sympathy between herself and Victor, of a mysterious mutual influence, by which never, to the end of their lives, she could be linked with Gérard. Fanni knew by instinct that this was rather wrong; but she did not try at all to put it out of her head or to struggle against it. The girl, with her sad eyes, her restless mind, was something of a fatalist.

“How can I help it if he likes me?” she said to herself. “He is the only friend I have.”

Nothing had ever passed between them that the whole world might not have

heard and seen. Fanni sometimes told herself that it would be very nice to have a kind thoughtful brother like Victor. Then one day she caught herself hoping that he would go to Africa, and not come back till they were all old people, and cared for nothing. Then she was a little shocked at herself, and felt like the bad heroine of a novel. Yet, after all, she was only one more of the victims for whom kind relations arrange everything, on the convenient supposition of their having no wishes or fancies of their own.

The thought of Victor's going, and of the dulness of things without him, put the English girl out of Fanni's head for the moment. She stood in the library window, looking sulky and dismal, and feeling, in the utter silence that reigned indoors and out, as if everybody had



forgotten her. She would not go back to the salon. Who was to know when her mother and the Marquise would have finished their confidences? If Victor chose to go away without wishing her good-bye, let him! Gérard probably would not remind him of her existence, and he was not likely to think of it himself. This was the height of sulky unreasonableness, as Fanni knew very well, and she was not surprised in the least by the sudden approach of rather hurried steps along the room.

“What are you doing in this cold room all alone?” said Victor walking up to her.

“Nothing,” said Françoise; “that is, mamma sent me to look for a book, but I have not found it.”

“What book?”

“I forget.”

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"Shall I go and ask Madame de Brye, and then come back and help you to find it?"

"No; it does not matter—she doesn't care," said Françoise. "Besides, you have not time; you are going away."

"Not quite directly," said Victor.

To his quick ears there was a wonderful flattery in those last little words of hers. They sounded cold and commonplace enough, spoken in her low indifferent voice, with her face half turned away; but Victor understood his old playfellow better than any one else did, better than she did herself.

"Yes," he went on, "I did not think I should be here now; but Maulévrier has never in its life been so pleasant, you see, and I have stayed in spite of myself—perhaps foolishly. The more one enjoys anything, the more quickly one

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ought to bring it to an end. It never answers to lose hold of it, and let it bring itself to an end; there is a hopelessness in that which makes one feel like a fool."

"Sometimes one can't help it," said Françoise.

"It is a pity," said Victor.

Then there was a long silence. She looked out of the window, and he looked at her, neither of them making the least pretence to be cheerful. Victor, in fact, was much graver than usual; he honestly regretted, just then, that he had not gone away three weeks ago, and wondered what good he had done himself by loitering on here.

The silence was broken by Fanni, who appeared at that moment the more philosophical of the two.

"Well, I must not keep you now,"

she said. "Perhaps we shall see you next month in Paris."

"Perhaps so," said Victor; "at any rate, in November."

"Adieu, then," said Françoise, holding out her hand.

There was a little new hardness in her manner which Victor admired. He took her hand, bent over it and kissed it.

"Adieu, Mademoiselle Fanni," he said, and walked gravely away.

But before he had reached the door she called him back, speaking quickly, and laughing in an agitated sort of way.

Victor turned quite pale as he came back to her; he could not imagine what she wanted, and would have been glad just then to make his escape quietly. His philosophy had not quite reckoned on the pain of this parting. But he soon perceived that her excitement had to do

with her own affairs, and not with him at all.

“Monsieur Victor, before you go—there is no one else I can ask—will you tell me something about those English people?”

“What, did they interest you?” said Victor, stroking his moustache, and looking at her with the gravity of an old counsellor.

“Yes, very much. What made them go away so suddenly? I particularly want to know.”

“I was not here,” said Victor; “but I understood that they lost some money.”

“Oh, I know, they were ruined; but I don’t mean that. Why did madame your mother take such a dislike to them, especially to Mademoiselle Pauline? What did she do? tell me—tell me in confidence. They were talk-

ing about it just now, when mamma sent me out of the room, and I don't see why it should be a secret, do you?"

She came a little nearer to Victor, her face alight with excitement.

"Jealous, poor child; no doubt she had cause; but I wish I knew what really happened," thought Victor.

"Chère demoiselle," he said, softly, "I certainly would keep no secrets from you; but I cannot tell you what I don't know myself. *I* was never responsible for those English people and their doings; I never liked them from the beginning—"

At this point Victor stopped short, and hesitated a little. He perhaps heard an approaching step, for just at that moment the door opened, and Gérard came into the room.

"Gérard can tell you all about it," he went on, in the same low tone. "He

"knows, and it is his duty. I think I must leave it to him."

He smiled and retreated, while Gérard, looking rather strange and dreamy, advanced into the room.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### ANSWER.

**F**RANÇOISE did not stop to think whether Gérard had heard his brother's last words or not. She felt herself strung to a pitch of desperate restless excitement. She never knew what made her call Victor back, and ask him that question just then; it was some wild incomprehensible feeling, as she saw him walk away, that now Fate was indeed clutching her fast, that her last chance of freedom, her last hold on the outer world, was going away with him to Paris through that tall dark door. She was to be left among all these people, to be tied and gagged



and kept in any darkness they pleased, and not even allowed to know her own concerns, with which she now felt sure that this English girl was mixed up in some mysterious way. For a moment she had forgotten this cause of trouble, in the sadness of Victor's farewell; but before he was gone it came rushing into her mind again, and she could not help calling her friend back.

Now he was really gone, and she was left alone with Gérard, the proper person, after all, to make explanations and relieve her anxieties. She looked at him as he came along the room; he was more like his old self that day—grave and quiet. His eyes fell on Françoise, but hardly as if he saw her, wandering on to the window behind her, and the waving trees. He could not, of course, know that he and Françoise were think-

ing of the same person, and it was no wonder that he started and coloured painfully when his fiancée, standing in the same place where Pauline had stood that remembered morning, said to him suddenly,

“I wish you would tell me what has become of Mademoiselle Mowbray.”

For a moment Gérard was so much confused that he did not know how to answer her; all his new coolness had fled; he could hardly meet Fanni’s eyes, which were fixed on him with a sort of eager determination. But this could not last. Gérard recovered himself, walked slowly forward, and leaned against the window, with his back to the light.

“I have not heard from Monsieur Mowbray since they went back to England,” he said, quietly. “Has Victor

wished you good-bye? he is just going."

"Yes," said Françoise. "I have often wondered, do you know, why your English friends went away so suddenly. They were everything, and then they were nothing. I don't think it is nice of you to forget them, and never to talk about them. I am sure they all thought you liked them very much."

She admired her own power of sarcasm ; but apparently it was wasted on Gérard, who answered gravely, without lifting his eyes, "You ask why they went away so suddenly. A bank broke in England, and they lost nearly all they had. That was why they went away."

"Mon Dieu !" said Françoise. "And is that why you have forgotten them, and ceased to like them ? What a beautiful reason ! You certainly are a friend worth having."

"I have not forgotten them," Gérard answered, rather shortly.

"Why do you never talk about them? What did they do to make your mother angry? that is what I want to know. Why does she say that Mademoiselle Pauline is odious, and abominably brought up?"

"When did she say that?" said Gérard, very low.

"Just now—to my mother, who was asking her the same sort of questions that I am asking you. And then when my mother asked her why she thought so, she would not answer while I was in the room. So they sent me away; but I mean to know all about it, in spite of them."

"My mother is prejudiced; she judged them unjustly," said Gérard. "But why do you trouble yourself about it? They

are gone away, and we shall never see them again. The past is dead, and I advise you to bury it, as we do."

"*Merci!*" said *Françoise*, a little mockingly. "I think I should like first to be quite sure that it is dead."

Then it struck her that she was speaking very plainly, and that *Gérard* could hardly be stupid enough to misunderstand her. She also felt sure that her suspicions were right, and that *Madame de Maulévrier* had good reason to be angry with *Pauline*. She herself was not exactly angry with *Pauline*; a triumphant feeling of possible freedom was creeping over her. She forgot all her shyness, her stiffness with *Gérard*, and watched him for a minute in breathless silence, too much excited to be frightened at what she was doing. *Gérard* himself was horribly annoyed, and did not know what to say.

“The past is dead,” he repeated, after a long pause. “You must be generous enough to take my word for it; that is all that I can say.”

“What has generosity to do with it? I am not generous; I never was, and I hate to have things hidden from me. It is bad enough, without being buried in mysteries as well. I shall make my mother tell me all that Madame de Maulévrier has told her.”

“You must please yourself,” said Gérard.

“Very well, as you cannot answer such a simple question.”

“What was the question?” he said, absently.

Françoise laughed. “How did Mademoiselle Mowbray become suddenly detestable?”

“Mademoiselle Mowbray is not to be blamed,” said Gérard, sternly and

haughtily. "I tell you, I cannot account for other people's prejudices ; but, as you are so anxious to know the truth, I, not she, am the person not to be forgiven. She was odiously treated here, and, as you wish me to confess everything, the thought of my own part in it all is enough to make me die of shame."

Françoise stood gazing at him, her large eyes wide open, and her cheeks pale with astonishment. This passion in Gérard was a revelation to her. Her vague discontented suspicions had suddenly become startling realities, and whatever Gérard might say, the past was not dead to him.

"You tell me this!" she said, half under her breath.

"Yes ; I answer your question?" said Gérard.

He was leaning on the back of the sofa, and, for a moment, he covered his face with his hand. Then he suddenly held it out to her.

“Can you forgive me?” he said. “I was mad, but I am in my right senses now.”

“No,” said Françoise.

She turned round and walked away, as if she meant to leave him there; but she lingered and hesitated, and came slowly back again. A new dignity and spirit seemed to have come to the girl; yet her expression, as she looked at Gérard, was not scornful or angry, as one might have fancied; on the contrary, there was a certain sweetness in it, and, to his anxious interested eyes, she had never looked so well as she did then.

“Poor Gérard!” she said, half to herself. He winced a little, but listened



silently. "Now we may speak the truth to each other," she said. "I am glad I asked you, and I am glad you told me this. You have suffered a great deal because of me—hating me all the time—and—"

"No, never," interrupted Gérard, earnestly, "I meant—"

"I know you meant to be very polite and nice," said Françoise. "But you wished that I never existed."

"I never wished anything of the kind."

"Ah, well, I suppose if I had died, it would not have done you much good. Don't interrupt me again, for I want to say something. Do you remember when you came to Tourlyon in the summer, you asked me if I liked this arrangement; and you said if I did not, it should be put an end to, and that anything that I wished was possible? And I was a little

ignorant coward, and afraid of my parents, and I said I did not wish for any change. Do you remember?"

"Yes," said Gérard.

"But since then I have not seen very much of you, it is true, but enough to show me one thing—that you and I could never, never, never be happy together, if we had been married for a thousand years." She stopped, blushing scarlet, as if suddenly aware that she was speaking very vehemently, and saying things that would have made her mother scream. "Don't you agree with me?" she said, in a lower tone.

"You may be right," said Gérard, sadly. "but still—"

"Don't argue, it is only half your fault," she said. "But I want to say that now I have changed my mind, and I do not like this arrangement; and

they may all say what they please, I will not consent to it."

"It is very sudden," stammered Gérard.

"It seems sudden to you," said the strange girl, "but you only see one reason, and I have several. O, I am very glad that I spoke to you this afternoon! Now give me your word—if all these people wish to insist on going on with it, you will refuse as firmly as I do."

"Of course it is for you to decide," said Gérard. "But what am I to do?"

"Go to England," answered Fanni; and then she was suddenly seized with shame, and, turning away from Gérard, hurried out of the room.

He followed her a few steps, and then went back to the window, and stood there frowning and gazing out at the trees. His thoughts were in a wild tumult; an incredible rapture of happiness was trying to

overwhelm them all, but not quite successfully. One happy truth, at any rate, he might lay hold of: he was free. Who could have fancied Françoise an angel of deliverance, undoing his chains herself and setting him free? His feeling towards her just then was not far short of adoration; he called her to himself a noble girl, and wished all the women in the country were like her. Then he gladly forgot her for a few minutes; she and her nobleness did not matter to him any more; and he lost himself in a dream of some one else, from which he was roused by Victor's voice calling,

"I thought you were gone," he said, waking up suddenly, and going to meet his brother.

"Did you? I am going now," said Victor, looking at him with a certain curiosity.

He did not understand the half-conscious happiness in Gérard's face. Evidently he and Fanni had not quarrelled; on the contrary, their interview must have been perfectly satisfactory to both of them; for he had met Fanni just now in the hall, and though she hardly spoke to him, her face looked quite soft and smiling, and as happy as Gérard's. Two fools—two heartless fools—Victor called them in his own mind. He felt cold and angry, and wondered what sort of sentiment Gérard had pumped up to quiet Fanni's jealous suspicions; but of course Gérard was not likely to give him any explanation.

"I have been telling the Comtesse that I hope I may see them next month in Paris," said Victor. "I suppose you will be there too?"

"In Paris! I don't know," said Gérard.

"I think you will find I am right. I

hope everything will go smoothly ; and now I must be off."

Gérard looked at him more dreamily than ever, and seemed to be going to speak, but his speech resolved itself into, "Ah, goodbye !" His new liberty felt like something so filmy, so evanescent, that he dared not put it into words yet. Victor, besides, would almost certainly tell him that any change was impossible now—that the marriage must go on in spite of Françoise and her whims—Victor had entered so cordially into his mother's plans about it, and thought it such a good thing. He was not a satisfactory confidant at any time, and now he would be a dangerous one.

As these thoughts passed through Gérard's mind, his mother's plans, the sacrifice his brothers had made for him, he knew how much afraid he was of his mother. Could Françoise de Brye's

resolution stand against hers ? That was the question ; and as Gérard asked it, he felt as if the last half-hour had been nothing but an exciting dream ; “the cold despotism of fact” was beginning to reassert itself.

They all went out to see Victor drive away. M. de Brye and Léon had come in from shooting, and a cheerful party was assembled on the steps. All were there but Françoise ; at least Gérard thought so, as he stood silently among the others ; but then he heard “Adieu, mademoiselle,” from Victor, and looking round he saw a flushed, smiling face in the background, full of a spirit, a triumph, which amazed him, it was so unlike her. The weary, wistful, disconnected Fanni, for once in her life, looked gay.

Victor felt furious, and drove off biting his lips, calling her a heartless child half the way to Tourlyon.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### NEW PLANS.

“**N**ONSENSE, Léon! you are mad, you are dreaming, my dear child. Madame la Marquise could never allow it!” exclaimed Monsieur Olivier, in great excitement.

His little study was full of morning sunshine, in the full glow of which he was sitting in his armchair; his gray curls flowed out under his black skull-cap; his pale thin face and intelligent eyes were turned towards Léon, who had taken a chair near the door. Léon could not help laughing a little under his moustache, as he caressed the cat on his knee, at the unfeigned, incredulous horror his news had caused.



“They have taken it into their own hands,” he said, trying not to laugh, for his old tutor was very serious. “But perhaps I ought not to have told you so suddenly, Monsieur le Curé,” he added as an agreeable afterthought, for it occurred to him that the Curé might have another fit.

“What a misfortune! It is Gérard’s fault, I suppose; alas, perhaps it is my fault for keeping him here that Sunday when he ought to have been at the Maison Blanche. But I was too ill to think. Foolish, wicked boy, what has he done?”

“Nothing at all, I tell you,” said Léon, positively. “Everything has gone on well for a fortnight. Gérard was not dreaming of any change. It is Mademoiselle Françoise herself who has done it all. She simply says she will not marry him. My mother had the letter from Madame de

Brye an hour ago, as I say. Madame de Brye is almost as furious as my mother; but she says she can do nothing, Fanni will listen to nothing; and as for Gérard, he will only say that she told him the same yesterday afternoon and that he was quite unprepared for it, but that he will never keep a girl to an engagement that she wishes to break off. So there is nothing to be done with either of them, and we are all in despair."

Léon certainly smiled a little as he told this tragical story; but the Curé was now leaning forward on the table, resting his forehead on his hands.

"She is a most independent young lady," he said. "Who could she possibly prefer to Gérard?"

Léon became grave at this, lifted his eyebrows, and looked a little mysterious.

"I mean," said the Curé, "who could

be more attractive than a chevalier like Gérard? She must be very difficult to please; but women are always like that, I believe—if you show them one path, they are sure to take another.”

“I am not sure, though, that she and Gérard—their characters, I mean—were made for each other,” said Léon, thoughtfully, stroking the cat.

“They were,” answered the Curé, positively. “Providence and their parents had arranged that they should marry—that proves it.”

“Their parents, Monsieur le Curé, but possibly not Providence,” Léon suggested shyly; and he was rather glad that his old tutor took no notice of this remark, which might have sounded a little impious in his ears.

“Poor Madame de Maulévrier!” said the Curé; and he pushed back his chair,

and walked rather feebly up and down the room. "A new marriage for Gérard," he went on muttering, "all her plans defeated—perhaps all that trouble with him over again. No, he could not be such a fool, he must have forgotten by this time. But it is too hard on his mother. How does your poor mother take it, Léon? But first tell me, how does Gérard take it?"

"Gérard is very quiet, and rather dismal; but not very," answered Léon, with cheerfulness. "My mother—well, I would advise Mademoiselle Fanni to keep out of her way for the present. Madame de Brye thinks so too, I suppose, for she says that unless Fanni comes to her senses, they will go away to Tour-lyon to-morrow."

"Is your mother angry with Gérard?"

"No, not very, for of course it is not

actually his fault. But I tell you, Monsieur le Curé, we are all in despair."

It was no wonder. Françoise de Brye's resolution was like a thunderbolt from a clear blue sky, unexpected and dreadful. The scandal, the wickedness, of breaking off an engagement in this way had been set before her last night with the utmost plainness by her mother, who absolutely cried with indignation, but without producing any effect on the heartless girl. M. de Brye's behaviour was very weak. When his wife called him in to support her authority over Françoise, he did nothing but look doubtfully at the child, and say it was a great pity.

"It would be a greater pity, papa, for me to marry and be miserable," said Françoise, going up to him, and looking at him earnestly, with her hand on his arm.

"Yes, Fanni, I think it would," said the foolish father.

Madame de Brye was really despairing, for Françoise would not even give her any good reason for breaking off the engagement. A very sensitive girl might have found it in what the Marquise had said about Pauline Mowbray; but Fanni, her mother knew, had heard nothing of that. She said it was not Gérard's fault in any way, she liked Gérard very much; it was all her own doing, and she had done it simply because she felt sure that they would not be happy together; she had told him so."

"And was he willing to give you up?" asked Madame de Brye, bitterly.

"Not very," said Fanni, who certainly bore Gérard no malice on this occasion.

"And his poor mother, what will she do?" said M. de Brye, with a slight

chuckle. "After all her troubles and exertions! She will send him here to-morrow morning to beg you to change your mind again."

"He will not come," said Fanni.

"Too proud; and that is much to his credit," said M. de Brye.

"Mon Dieu, Alphonse!" exclaimed his wife; "you treat the child as if she had done something nice and good, instead of having almost committed a crime. Yes, mademoiselle, it is a crime to break one's word. Go to your room and think about it. I will hear no more to-night."

"My dear friend," said M. de Brye, when Françoise had wished them good-night, and gone obediently away, "I hate tyranny. When one is given an only child, it is not to make her miserable, do you see. It is only the other day, when you were a little angry with Mon-

sieur Gérard, you talked yourself of making some other arrangement, and even mentioned names—do you remember? Fanni is a naughty child, of course, but I believe this may be for the best—he is an odd fellow, Gérard. Some more reasonable man would be a better match for her. The person I am really sorry for is Madame de Maulévrier; she has planned this for years.”

“If Victor had been the eldest son!” said Madame de Brye, regretfully.

“Ah, yes. And it might have been so arranged. Victor might have been made the eldest. I thought of it at the time. But, with her crazy love for Gérard, she never would have consented.”

“That is natural, after all. Well, she will soon find someone else for her precious Gérard—a person of no family,



perhaps ; for no one would care, except from old friendship—”

“Poor woman ! But she is very proud,” said Madame de Brye. “Yes, I am sorry for her.”

The Marquise de Maulévrier would, perhaps, have said that a great deal of this pity was wasted on her. The shock was certainly upsetting ; but in a few hours she began to console herself, and to see all the disadvantages of the Brye connection. For instance, she had never liked Françoise personally, and it would not have been pleasant, after all, to spend her days with an ill-tempered, obstinate daughter-in-law. If the girl’s own parents could not manage her, her husband and his mother would probably also have failed.

Then Madame de Brye was a mixture of prying and stupidity ; Monsieur de

Brye was a bore; and none of them, the Marquise was sure, had the smallest real appreciation of Gérard. His mother treated Gérard as an injured hero; and, after the first ten minutes, was not angry with him at all. Certainly she never dreamed of any attempt to make the faithless Françoise change her mind again. She came down to Monsieur Olivier that same afternoon, and talked the whole thing over with him, confessing that from a worldly point of view it was a misfortune, but, on the whole, taking it with a calm courage and resignation, which was a great relief to the Curé. There were plenty more young ladies in the world, she observed, besides Mademoiselle de Brye—well-born royalist, with a tolerable dot; young ladies to whose families the very name of Maulévrier would be attraction enough.

The Curé listened respectfully, and hoped she was right.

The Curé was almost a prisoner in his study, being too weak to go out much; and there he sat for the next few days, hearing the various confidences of his friends at the château, who came down to consult him one by one. It was plain enough that new troubles were preparing, and that the family peace could not last long.

The Maison Blanche was again deserted, the Bryes were gone back to Tourlyon, and Madame de Maulévrier heard from an old friend in that neighbourhood that there was absolutely some question of Françoise's marriage with a young man of immense fortune, whose father had made his money in some contemptible way under the Empire, and who had no claim at all to his title of Baron, which nobody,

however, was rude enough to refuse him.

“Now we understand these dear Bryes,” said Madame de Maulévrier, with scorn. “Money was what they wanted. The girl thought that Gérard would not give her fine clothes and jewellery enough. If people could only see themselves, she would wish to be as little conspicuous as possible.”

Monsieur Olivier said nothing, but he smiled. The mixture of great and little in this most intimate friend of his was a subject of curious contemplation. Like most men of his profession, he was tempted to despise women in proportion to his influence over them; but being really clever and amiable, contempt was not easy to him. Besides, his influence over Madame de Maulévrier had such definite limits, that admiration was

generally his strongest feeling towards her.

After all, she had not much right to laugh at the exertions of Madame de Brye, for she herself was already setting to work, with the greatest eagerness, to find a wife for Gérard. Old friends of her youth were suddenly recalled to her memory. The Vicomtesse de C.; it was a dozen years since they had met, or even exchanged a letter. She lived chiefly in Paris, where Madame de Maulévrier never went now; but she was a charming person—*comme-il-faut*, *bien-pensante*, *dévot*—a really perfect woman; and her daughter, who must now be eighteen, had no doubt been brought up to the same perfection. Madame de Maulévrier opened the trenches by writing a letter to a mutual friend, the Comte de B., a delightful old man, who was one of the greatest match-makers in France.

Then there was Monsieur de K., so well known among the Legitimists. Rich and old, he was generally buried in his château in Brittany. He had never recovered from the shock of his wife's death, and it was a matter of regret to all his friends that he persisted in keeping his only daughter shut up at home, and had refused several excellent offers for her. His obstinacy alone had kept her unmarried till now. She was five-and-twenty, she had never been pretty, and her looks did not improve with the passing years. But everyone said she was most amiable, and this was not the first time that Madame de Maulévrier had thought of her as a possible wife for Gérard. She had taken no steps, however, till now, for Mademoiselle de Brye had seemed so much the likeliest and the most suitable person, and she had feared that Gérard, a fanciful

young man, might quite refuse to be attracted by Mademoiselle de K. At present, however, the Marquise felt that Gérard's fancies could not be considered to this extent. He must marry, and the sooner the better; the Bryes, while they married their faithless daughter to another man, must not be able to flatter themselves that the Marquise de Maulévrier was pining for her, alone among his woods. Madame de Maulévrier therefore wrote at once to an old Baronne, a cousin of Monsieur de K.'s, and a distant connection of her own, who had already exerted herself several times, though in vain, to arrange the future of Mademoiselle de K.

His mother did not think it at all necessary to consult Gérard before writing these letters; when one affair or the other was really put in train it would be time

enough to tell him what she had done. He would see his duty, she had no doubt, and accept quietly whatever she had arranged for him.



## CHAPTER XV.

### LÉON'S SUGGESTION.

LÉON DE MAULÉVRIER found life dull without his brother Victor, who had generally represented the world and its gaieties to him. He was a lively, curious, sociable young man, and for want of something more amusing, he now took a deep and affectionate interest in the affairs of his eldest brother. Always, however, with Victor in the background. That arrangement by which everything was given up to Gérard had always seemed to Léon, perfectly unselfish for himself, a hard thing for Victor; and Victor's cheerful consent to it struck Léon as something fine. What was nothing in

himself was a merit somehow in Victor, who, by his talents and his character, seemed entitled to any goods that life might offer him. Victor might give himself airs, and no one need be injured. These thoughts had occupied Léon a good deal since one day when Victor had let him see a slight mixture of bitterness in his philosophy.

Gérard and Léon had been out shooting together, and came home across the park in the afternoon, meeting their mother as she walked down to visit the ducks. They stopped to tell her what sport they had had. Madame de Maulévrier smiled on them both and told them they were good shots; her face looked more happy and serene that day than they had seen it since the Brye catastrophe.

“Did the post come?” asked Léon.  
“Is there a letter for me from Victor?”

"Nothing for you," said Madame de Maulévrier. "But here is one, Gérard, from the Comte de B. which you can read, and we will talk about it by and by."

"The Comte de B.!" repeated Gérard. "Is he a correspondent of yours?"

"He is a very old friend of mine," replied his mother. "We have not met for years; but I wrote to him the other day to consult him about the affairs of a certain person—there, read it, and you will see what a kind interest he takes in them, and be flattered and grateful, I hope."

Gérard's face became rather blank as he took the letter from her hand; but Madame de Maulévrier was so much pleased with herself and Monsieur de B. that she did not notice this. She walked on down the shady slopes towards the ponds, the two young men with her.

There was silence till Gérard gave her back the letter. Léon kept a little behind, his ears wide open. He supposed that this was not to be a secret from him, as his mother did not send him away; but now, as he glanced at Gérard's pale and frowning face, he felt a little anxious, and rather wished he had not turned back with them. He was an amiable boy, and disliked scenes; even his curiosity was not strong enough to make him enjoy them.

"Mother, I am very sorry you have done this," said Gérard, so sternly that both his companions were startled. "We have all had enough of these things for the present, surely; and if you had consulted me, I should have told you that—that—"

"What, pray?" said Madame de Maulévrier.

"That I have made up my mind not to marry at all," said Gérard, with the sudden doggedness of a person who always has given in, and knows that he will probably have to do so again.

Of course there were all the old arguments—name, cause, family, and the rest. They had entangled him with Françoise de Brye, and now, instead of her, Fate was only taking the shape of the good and pretty and charming Jeanne de C., about whom old Monsieur de B. wrote with the affection of a grandfather. Gérard, who had been tolerably happy during the past week, enjoying a freedom which he hardly dared to realise, found himself plunged back into despair by this new complication. As he was not to escape after all, not even to have a few months' peace, he was almost sorry that Françoise had not let things alone. He

and she knew each other pretty well, at any rate, and would not have expected too much; and besides, in that last interview, she had shown him glimpses of a fineness of character he had not at all suspected; since then, when he thought of her at all, it was with real interest and kindness. But it was no use wasting regrets upon the past, which was gone for ever.

“You are absurd,” said Madame de Maulévrier, impatiently. “Go away, Léon, if you please. I must talk to your brother.”

Léon turned back at once, not unwillingly. He felt really sorry for poor old Gérard, and honestly thankful that he was not his mother’s eldest son. He walked back towards the château, thinking very seriously, and before he got there it seemed so necessary to talk the

matter over with somebody, that he changed his course and went down by a short cut to the village, to pay a visit to the Curé. M. Olivier listened with great interest to all he had to say, and echoed his "Poor Gérard!" with a rather sad smile.

"But you see, my dear little fellow, there is no use talking about it," he said, looking kindly at Léon; "these things must be, and I thought Gérard knew that as well as we do, and had made up his mind since he came home from Spain."

"But, if he had, Monsieur le Curé, all this makes a great difference. How can he engage himself to another girl in such a hurry? I would not do it."

"I suspect you would be less troublesome than Gérard," said the Curé.

"I think it is very hard," Léon went

on, in an excited, earnest manner. "We are all at cross-purposes. Why should Gérard be made to marry against his will?"

"Why did you and your brothers give up your succession to him? These family arrangements do not mean sacrifice on one side only—not in this case, at least."

"Gérard did not want us to do it."

"Of course, I know it was your mother's doing. Believe me, my dear boy, none of us can arrange his life for himself. But what do you mean—do you grudge your part in the affair? Do you wish to marry—yourself?"

This abrupt question brought the colour into Léon's face, but he laughed.

"No, Monsieur le Curé, the idea has never crossed my mind, I assure you. I am not thinking of myself at all."



"Very well; let your mind be at ease, then. Gérard has not behaved very wisely all through, and he and his mother must manage these things between them. You and I may talk, but we cannot help him."

Léon did not seem contented. He leaned forward, passing his hand over his forehead, and staring at the floor with a painful puzzled expression.

"Well, what is it?" said M. Olivier, watching him.

"Monsieur le Curé, I will tell you a secret," said Léon, looking up, and speaking almost in a whisper. I found it out myself. Gérard and my mother have not a notion of it. It is about Victor."

"Victor!" said the Curé, much surprised. He seldom thought of Victor, who was much less his friend than any of the other boys.

"I believe," said Léon, with hesitation, "that Victor would have liked to be in Gérard's place."

"Very probably," said the Curé. "But Gérard is the eldest, and Victor had no more right to be considered than you or Jules."

"I don't mean that. Victor gave up to Gérard as willingly as any of us. What I mean is—if Gérard had been Victor, you know—that is, if Victor had been Gérard—"

"Don't try to explain too clearly, my friend; your lucidity dazzles one."

Léon was too deeply in earnest to mind being laughed at.

"Well, Monsieur le Curé, you understand, I am sure," he said, patiently. "I want to say it as plainly as I can, because I am so very certain of it. If it had been Victor, and not Gérard, who

was engaged to Françoise de Brye, know the engagement would never have been broken off. Yes, it is true. Victor always liked her a great deal better than Gérard did, and I think, too—though, of course, I ought not be so sure about that—I believe she likes him better than any of us.”

The Curé looked very grave, and did not speak for a minute.

“If this is true,” he said at last, “what makes it worth mentioning?”

“At any rate,” said Léon, colouring scarlet, “I should not have mentioned it unless it had been true.”

“Very well; but what difference can it make to anybody, except to make you and me, and these foolish people themselves, rather glad that the engagement fell through as it did.”

“Yes, I could not be so sorry as

my mother was," said Léon, quietly. "Gérard declares he will never marry," he added after a minute.

He was not sure that his old tutor at all followed the train of thoughts which were pressing on him. Probably not, for his young mind was unusually quick and active just now, and had imagined a future which seemed to him very suitable to both his brothers; but he was not presumptuous enough to make a verbal picture of this, which really was almost too bold and romantic. It might be hard on Gérard; but Léon thought in Gérard's place he would have rather liked it. There was no saying what Monsieur le Curé might be thinking about, as he sat there looking out of the window. Perhaps in another minute Léon might have communicated his dreams, with the risk of being scolded

or laughed at for them ; but he had not the opportunity, for just then Gérard himself came up to the door.

“Go—quick ; don’t let him find you here !” said the Curé, turning round on Léon with the imperative fierceness of a dozen superior officers rolled into one. “Through that door, and out at the back—be off with you !”

Léon vanished instantly, before the low quick tones were silent ; and when Gérard came slowly into the room, he found the Curé sitting peacefully in his chair, meditating, as it seemed, on the changing autumn leaves that looked in at him.

Gérard was flushed, excited and miserable ; this seemed to be the worst trouble that he had ever poured out to his old friend ; it had been a cruel disappointment, thinking himself free, to find his mother already busy in forging new chains for him.

M. Olivier tried some of the old arguments about duty and loyalty, but found that they had lost their power with Gérard. He declared, over and over again, that he was firmly resolved never to marry at all. When he had talked and raved himself into comparative quietness, the Curé, who had been listening sadly enough, asked him what he had done with his philosophy.

"Philosophy! I never had any; it was a delusion," said Gérard.

"Ah! And when you say you will never marry, are there no possible circumstances under which that resolution would fail?"

Gérard paused a moment, looking at him.

"There are no *possible* circumstances, Monsieur le Curé," he answered, gravely.

"I understand. Well, then, Gérard, there are other things to be considered.

I don't know whether they have occurred to madame your mother. It is plain, then, that no son of yours will inherit Maulévrier. 'Gérard, fils de Gérard'—that pleasant legend must be given up."

"Yes, monsieur. If you could make my mother understand that she must give it up, you would be doing me the greatest kindness in the world."

"We shall see. Families have survived such a change as that. But when three brothers have resigned their succession in favour of one, and that one, after all, practically refuses to be the head of his family, of course the days of the family are numbered, unless his early death sets one of his brothers free to marry. I am assuming that you mean what you say, and that no reasonable marriage is possible for you. My dear Gérard, don't you think you ought to die?"

Gérard coloured and frowned ; it almost seemed as if Monsieur Olivier might be laughing at him and his troubles. But meeting his old tutor's clear kind eyes, certainly with the suspicion of a smile in them, he was obliged himself to smile, and answered, as simply as Léon might have done,

“I felt inclined to shoot myself just now, without thinking of such good reasons. But surely all that can be arranged without my dying. One of the others must be made the eldest, instead of me.”

“Yes, so I think,” said Monsieur Olivier. “Victor ought to take your place, if this resolution of yours really means anything. But Madame la Marquise, will she ever consent to that ?”

“I don't know. She ought—she must,” said Gérard. “Why should she object ?”



What is there in me? Why, she and I could live on here at Maulévrier. Victor would never want to live here—not for years, at any rate; she would not be troubled with his belongings. Yes, Monsieur le Curé, if you could persuade her to put Victor in my place, it would be the happiest thing for us all. I wished her to do it at the very first—last June, when these dreadful arrangements were first talked about. I knew then that they could never come to good.”

“I do not think it is Madame de Maulévrier’s fault that they have failed,” said M. Olivier.

After Gérard had left him, he sat meditating for a long time. The cat came and sat on the table beside him, and purred and rubbed her face against his shoulder; but he hardly noticed her. He was inclined to take Gérard’s part in this affair, to advise

the Marquise to take him at his word, and to let her schemes drop as far as he was concerned. What Léon had told him about Victor was certainly a curious coincidence, and might have shown a very plain way out of the difficulty; but was it likely that a proud woman like Madame de Maulévrier would ever consent to offer another of her sons to the young lady who had refused one? Still, thoughts were passing through the Curé's mind, as he sat in his study that autumn day, which, if they had been spoken or written words, would have made a great sensation in the houses of Brye and of Maulévrier.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE WAY OUT.

THE Marquise de Maulévrier was a proud woman, certainly, but she was a wise woman too, and her sense of duty was so strong that it was pretty sure to conquer in the end, even if it had to fight with her personal affections.

The Curé had several long talks with her in the next few days, and found her more reasonable than he had expected. She was really angry with Gérard—disappointed in him, and thinking him selfish and ungrateful; this perhaps made it easier for her to confess that the present and future well-being of the whole family could not be sacrificed to his fancies.

After bringing her to this point, M. Olivier ventured seriously to pass on the hints he had received from Léon. At first the Marquise was scornful and indignant; she went away saying that even if Victor had such bad taste, she could never again think of Mademoiselle de Brye as a possible daughter-in-law.

But she sat up late that night and considered the matter.

It was her favourite plan: she and her husband had many years ago talked over the prospects of their dwindling property, and agreed that it could most conveniently and naturally be enlarged in the direction of the Maison Blanche. By marrying M. de Brye's only child, the heir of Maulévrier would become once more one of the largest landowners in the department; the château, instead of being too large for the estate it stood upon, would be its

proper and stately centre, for of course the Maison Blanche could never pretend to any rivalry. All the old reasons were good reasons still ; they had made Madame de Maulévrier insist so sternly on Gérard's keeping to his engagement after he had been shaken by that dangerous visit of the foreigners. It was not her fault or his that the thing had fallen through after all. If the girl, possibly, liked Victor best, that was an explanation of her conduct. Not a creditable one, certainly ; but girls were so ill brought up in these days that Madame de Maulévrier supposed there might be something in it. She began to think that it might be her duty to sacrifice herself and Gérard for the sake of carrying out the old plan after all, and joining the estates of Brye and Maulévrier. If Gérard had ever cared about the marriage, she thought bitterly, it need not

have been broken off at all ; and yet deep in her heart she was glad that he should not marry such a girl as Françoise de Brye.

In the silence of the night Gérard's mother argued herself back into her old affection for him. She wondered if he had suspected anything of this fancy of Victor's, and resolved to question him about it ; she also determined that no step should be taken without his full consent telling herself that even if Victor had the money, Gérard should always, as long as she lived, be the real head of the house.

The next day, after breakfast, when Gérard and Léon followed her as usual into the salon, she looked from one to the other, and said suddenly,

“What reason have you, Léon, for thinking that your brother Victor likes Mademoiselle de Brye ?”

Léon blushed deeply; the Curé had betrayed him. He stood in the middle of the room and looked on the floor, while Gérard, who had taken up a newspaper, stared in amazement at his mother and coloured too.

“Go on. You are not a schoolboy,” said the Marquise.

Léon stammered out something about little signs—fancy—no business of his—something that Victor said one day—he really could not tell her any more. Madame de Maulévrier made no response to this halting confession, but sat in silence for several minutes looking straight before her.

Léon summoned up all his courage, and in three long steps reached a distant window, where he stood looking out into the garden, and wishing more heartily than usual that he could escape. His back

was turned to Gérard who said nothing, but waited in great surprise for his mother's next words. What discovery was going to be made now? Victor—Françoise! surely they were all dreaming! At last Madame de Maulévrier spoke, and her voice did not sound angry.

“Listen to me, my sons. Come here, Léon; you need not look out of the window. I wish to speak to you both, and to hear your opinion.”

Léon came a yard nearer to her, and sat down in a large chair. She then made them a very long speech, in which she entered a great deal into the family history and affairs, and explained to them all over again her reasons for making that arrangement early in the summer, by which the brothers were to give up their succession in Gérard's favour.

“But the sacrifice has been useless as



far as Gérard is concerned," she said. "I naturally wished him to be the head of the house, but he refuses. It is therefore my duty to put another of my sons in his place."

Gérard smiled, looking down. Léon was listening breathlessly.

"It must be Victor," said Madame de Maulévrier, in a colder voice. "Now you know that I had many reasons for wishing this Brye marriage to come off. It is the best thing possible for our family; your father talked of it when you were children—in fact, Gérard and Léon," she went on with a little agitation—"if Victor is to marry, and if he likes Françoise de Brye, as I am told, does it seem to you impossible that I should make inquiries—after her behaviour to you, Gérard—which this perhaps explains—could I possibly propose to her parents a marriage with Victor?"

Both young men were slow in answering her. Gérard looked rather gloomy, and did not seem inclined to speak at all.

“I should think you might do such a thing,” said Léon at last, as his elders remained silent. “If Gérard is sure that he means it, because we would rather have him.”

“Yes,” said the Marquise. “You now have your choice, Gérard; I have done nothing yet. You may still make me happy by taking your proper place; but I say this for the last time, my son.”

Gérard’s eyes were fixed on the floor, while his mother and Léon watched him anxiously. His hesitation almost brought a gleam of hope to Madame de Maulévrier; if he would still consent to her finding a wife for him, she would gladly give up the Brye idea once more, with all its advantages. Her face fell, and

Léon's, in spite of himself, brightened a little, when Gérard at last looked up and said,

"I have told you, mother; I meant it. I will gladly enter into any arrangement for Victor—anything you choose to do."

So Gérard shelved himself. Perhaps, when it came to the point of doing it thus coolly and deliberately, this choice of an obscure and lonely life, without a profession, without any great interests, was not such a very cheerful thing. But it was done, and Madame de Maulévrier accepted it quietly. She went on talking to the two young men in a calm business-like way about their brother's prospects. Gérard recovered his spirits by degrees, and Léon, finding the atmosphere lighter than usual, talked quite boldly about Victor and Françoise.

This plan seemed to Gérard strange enough, but he did not say so ; he only said cordially that he liked and admired Françoise.

“Very good of you,” said Madame de Maulévrier, with a touch of scorn. “As for me, I do neither ; but this is entirely a question of expediency. And I daresay our plans will fall through, after all. Did you not hear the report that they are going to marry her to that little parvenu Fleury, one of the richest men in France ? If they have got that into their heads, a Maulévrier will have no chance at all.”

“She will not marry Fleury,” said Gérard.

“She appears to be so fanciful that no one can possibly tell what she may do,” said Madame de Maulévrier. “However, I shall find out.”

After dismissing her sons, she went straight to the Curé, and told him all that they had decided together. The Curé felt a good deal of surprise and amusement, but did not show these feelings, and he was also touched by the sadness which was very plainly to be read under all her straightforwardness. There was no pleasure in arranging things for Victor; he was not Gérard, only his unwelcome substitute. The mother had never wanted any child after Gérard, and now his self-effacement wounded her deeply; but she was not angry with him any more, and all she said was gentle and reasonable. A mother's ambition and her love cannot always be satisfied by the same favourite child, though she would like to have it so. If Gérard was nobody to the world in general, he and she at least would never be parted,

and as long as she lived he would be the first person at Maulévrier.

Now that the Marquise had made up her mind to this new course, her chief difficulty was how to open fresh communications with M. de Brye; in this the Curé came to her aid. His Bishop, with whom he was a favourite, having heard of his illness, had just asked him to stay a few days at the Evêché at Tourlyon. This would at least be a fine opportunity for finding out whether there was really any talk in the town of Mademoiselle de Brye's marriage; and Madame de Maulévrier empowered her old friend, if he found the way clear, to consult the girl's family as to these new views of hers. As far as she was concerned, Victor, the person most interested, would have been left in ignorance till everything was settled; but Léon, having also

consulted the Curé, wrote him a short letter, and told him what was going on—certainly a startling letter for Victor to receive. He had only just heard that his brother's engagement was broken off.

Not long after this the Bishop of Tourlyon had a dinner-party, at which several respectable laymen of the town were present, as well as some of his clergy. Among his guests was the Comte de Brye, who was surprised to meet an old acquaintance there in the shape of the Curé of Maulévrier. They had a long talk, and M. de Brye went home to his wife in a state of great excitement. He bustled into the salon, where she was sitting up for him, working in dim lamplight with a rather gloomy face.

“Here is another proposal for that troublesome child,” he began. “I don’t

know what you will say. There are awkwardnesses—it is a come-down in a money point of view—but if she will not have anything to say to Fleury—”

Here Monsieur de Brye became aware that his wife was making eager angry signs to check his hurried speech, and at the same moment Françoise got up and came forward; she had been sitting in the shadow behind her mother, and had lately been scolded, if one might judge from her air of sulky weariness.

“No, papa, you may put Monsieur de Fleury out of your head,” she said. “And I wish you would not bring me any more proposals. I want to go into a convent.”

“Be quiet, Françoise,” said her mother, indignantly.

“Convent! nonsense, rubbish!” said M. de Brye. “You wish to break your



old father's heart, then. Go to bed this minute; I must talk to your mother."

"You had better let me stay and hear this new idea. I shall not sleep all night."

"As you were imprudent enough to mention it at all, my friend," said Madame de Brye, "you may as well go on. It is true, the child will only be kept awake by curiosity. I suppose from what you say the offer is not brilliant."

"Well, no, not exactly," said the Comte. "To tell you all in a few words, I met several pleasant men at the Evêché, and among them M. le Curé of Maulévrier."

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed Madame de Brye, dropping her needle, while Françoise raised her eyes with a sudden look of interest.

"Yes," said M. de Brye. "And he

was talking a good deal to me in confidence about the affairs of the Maulévriers, and telling me that the Marquise has determined to make an entirely new arrangement—in which I must say she shows herself a more sensible woman than I expected.”

“But that can have nothing to do with us,” said Madame de Brye, beginning to stitch again.

“Wait a little,” said her husband. He looked up at his daughter, whose large grave eyes were fixed upon him, and her lips a little parted: she was listening with a painful eagerness, which struck M. de Brye so much that he was obliged to cough and hesitate before going on with his story.

“We have nothing to do with the Maulévriers,” said Madame de Brye, rather sharply.

“Bien! that is as it may be. But our friend Gérard has made up his mind not to marry, and in consequence of that his mother is going to change all her arrangements, and make Victor the eldest son. The question therefore now is—” Monsieur de Brye glanced again at his daughter, but hardly caught the expression with which she received this news, for she just then turned away and went back to her low chair in the dark corner. His wife, however, showed quite amazement enough to satisfy him.

“Victor!” she said, and again dropped her needle.

“Yes, very strange, very eccentric,” said M. de Brye. “M. le Curé himself seemed doubtful as to how I might take the suggestion, but he made it with Madame de Maulévrier’s authority. I have been thinking over all our

acquaintances, and I really cannot call to mind a similar case. But it is not unlike our friend Madame de Maulévrier—she was always original.”

“Françoise,” said Madame de Brye, “you had better go to bed.”

“O no, maman,” said the girl, gently, from her corner, with a slight uncertainty in her voice. “I hope you will let me stay a little longer.”

Her father and mother were silent, and looked at each other. This was, indeed, a new tone for Fanni, who generally, when these subjects were started, was cold, scornful, rebellious, indifferent, or dismally resigned. Poor child! Monsieur and Madame de Brye had always thought Victor the most agreeable of the brothers, and now it seemed as if Fanni had agreed with them.

“But it is impossible!” said Madame

de Brye at last, in a low voice. "Madame de Maulévrier cannot really mean—quite absurd—impossible! Don't you think so?"

"What does Fanni think?" said M. de Brye.

She got up and stood with downcast eyes at the back of her mother's chair, lifting her eyelashes for one glance at her father.

"I don't see—why should it be impossible," she said, under her breath.

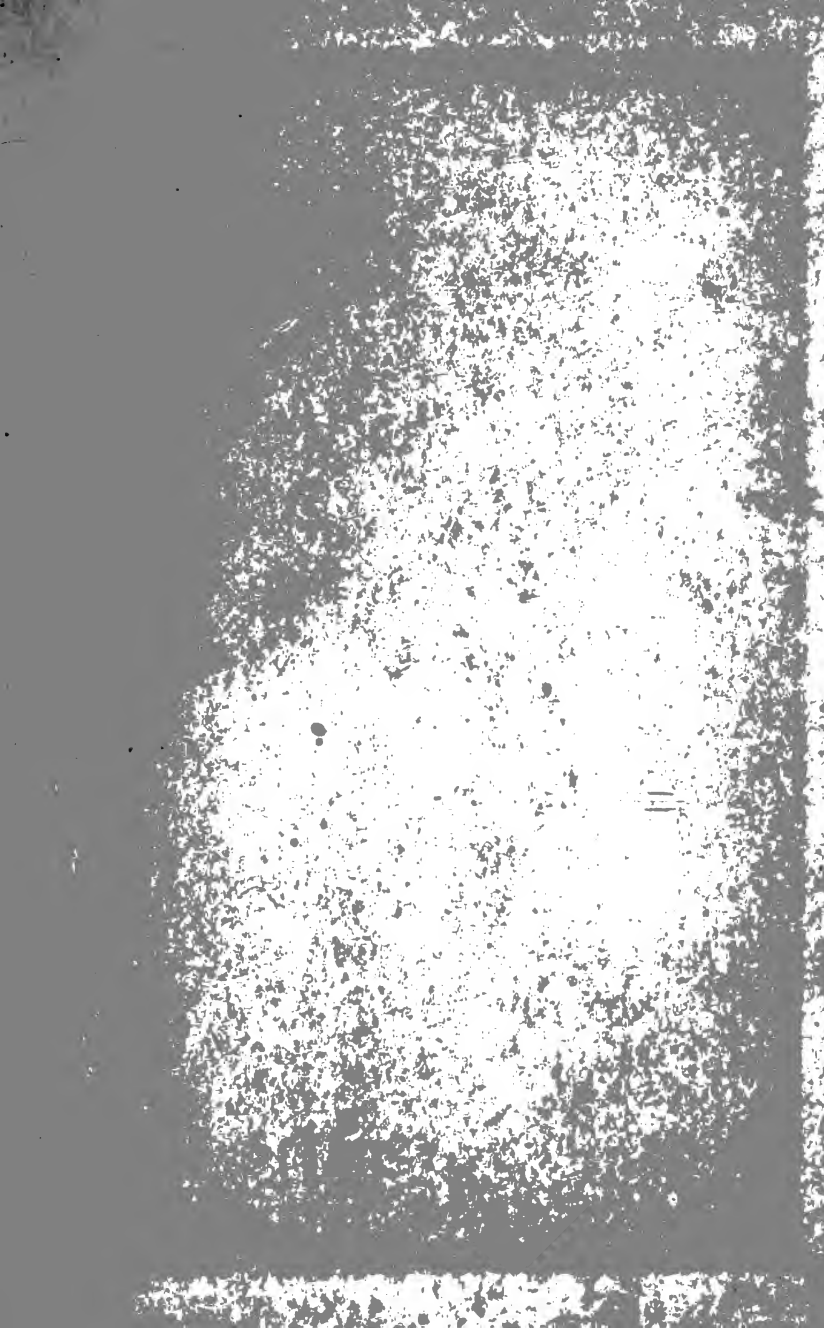
"Victor is in Paris," said Monsieur de Brye. "But I believe our friend the Curé has his authority too; and I asked him to come to breakfast to-morrow, and talk it over."

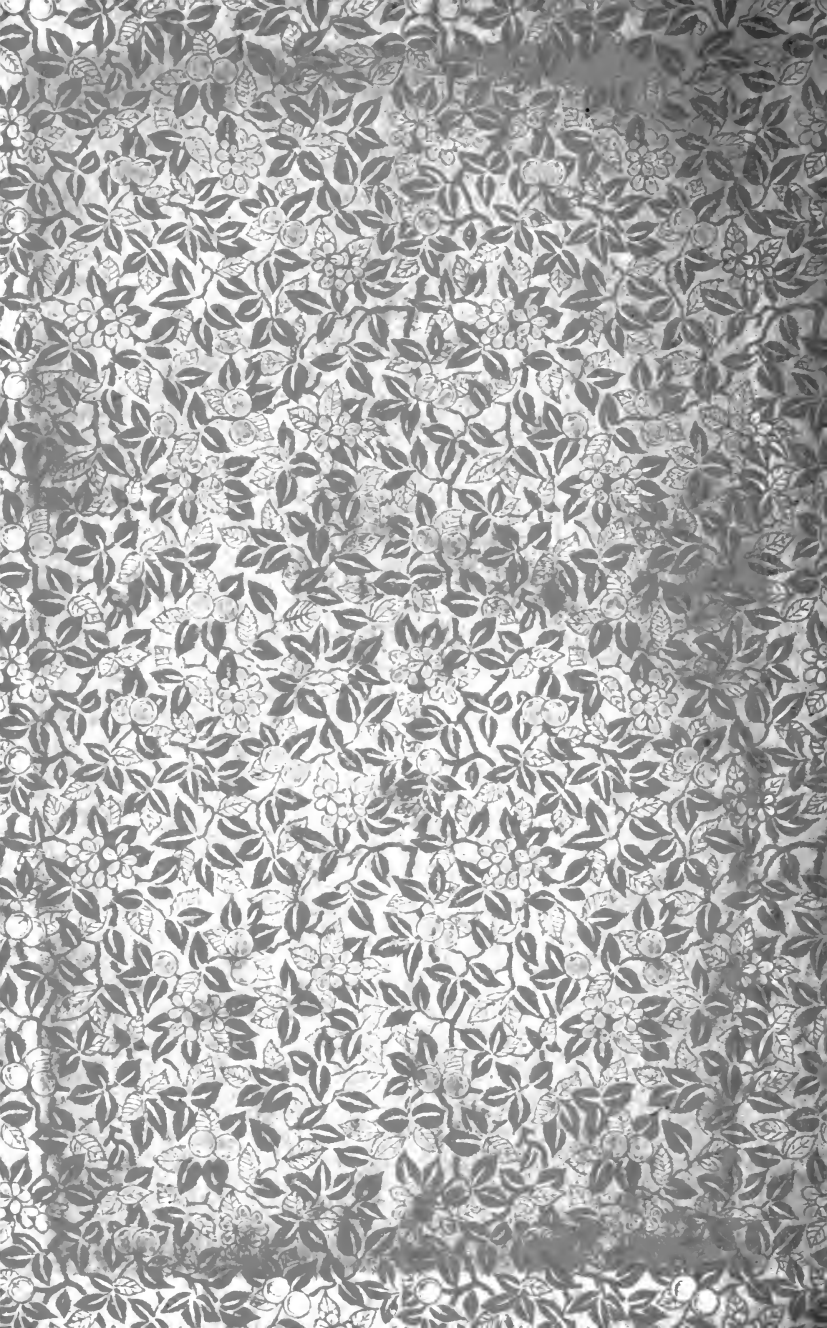
"Mon Dieu!" sighed Madame de Brye once more.

It is possible that, with all her liking for Victor, this return to the old path struck her as profoundly uninteresting.

But Fanni apparently did not think so. She came round with crimson cheeks, kissed her father and mother, and, without any more curiosity, went quietly away to her room.

END OF VOL. II.









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